COMMENTARY

ON THE AGENDA: DEATH

A Document of the Jewish Resistance

THE document here printed has a special place in the treasury of literature devoted to Jewish resistance to the Nazis; it is the record of a meeting of the executive committee of the Bialystok branch of the Hechalutz (Palestinian pioneers) movement in Bialystok, held February 27, 1943. The chairman was Mordecai Tannenbaum, who had been sent with some others from the Vilna ghetto to organize the resistance in Bialystok. The subject of the meeting was death.

On August 21, 1943, six months after the meeting (and six years ago this month), a detachment of German police entered the ghetto. They were greeted by a barrage of small arms fire, and fled in confusion; the battle of Bialystok began. The Nazis brought up heavy artillery and unleashed an eight-day bombardment, after which they put the ghetto to the torch. But the resistance continued until the bitter end, and it was not until the middle of September that the Nazis could proclaim that the revolt was suppressed. An estimated forty thousand Jews fell in the battle of Bialystok. One of them was Mordecai Tannenbaum.

This document, which was preserved by a Polish peasant living near Bialystok, is reprinted from the appendix to *Churbn Vilne* ("The Destruction of Vilna") by S. Z. Katsherginsky (New York, United Vilner Relief Committee, 1947). The translation from the Yiddish is by Milton Himmelfarb.—ED.

MORDECAI: I'm glad that at least we're in a good mood. Unfortunately, the meeting won't be very gay; this meeting is historic or tragic, as you prefer, but certainly sad. The few people sitting here are the last *chalutzim* in Poland. We are entirely surrounded by the dead. You know what has happened in Warsaw: no one is left. The same is true of Bendin and Czestochowa, and probably everywhere else. We are the last. It's not a particularly pleasant feeling to be the last; on the contrary, it imposes a special responsibility on us. We have to decide what to do tomorrow. There is no point in sitting together in the warmth of our memories, and there is no point in waiting for death together, collectively. What shall **we** do?

We can do two things: decide that with the first Jew to be deported now from Bialystok, we start our counter-attack, that from tomorrow on nobody goes to the factories, that nobody is allowed to hide during the action. Everybody will be mobilized. We can see to it that not one German leaves the ghetto alive, that not one factory is left standing.

It is not out of the question that after we have finished our task some of us may even be still alive. But it must be a fight to the finish, till we fall.

Or we could decide to escape to the woods. We must consider the possibilities realistically. Two of our comrades were sent today to make a place ready; in any event, as soon as the meeting is over a military alert will be instituted. We must decide now, because our fathers can't do our worrying for us. This is an orphanage.

There is one condition; our approach

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

must be based on an idea, and our thinking must be related to the movement. Whoever imagines or thinks that he has a real chance to stay alive, and wants to use his chance—fine, we'll help him in whatever way we can. Each one of us will have to decide for himself about his own life or death. But together we have to find a collective answer to the common question. I don't want to impose my opinion on anybody, so for the time being I won't express myself on the question.

ISAAC: What we're really debating is two different kinds of death. Attack means certain death. The other way means death two or three days later.

We ought to analyze both ways; perhaps something can be done. I don't have enough precise information, and I should like to hear the opinions of better informed comrades.

If comrades think that they could remain living, we ought to think about it.

HERSHL: It's still too early to strike a balance on everything we've lived through in the past year and a half. Nevertheless, in the light of the fateful decision confronting us, we must form a clear idea of what we have lived through.

Hundreds of thousands of Jews have perished in the last year; with great subtlety the enemy has succeeded in demoralizing us and leading us like cattle to the slaughterhouses of Ponar, Chelmno, Beloszyz, and Treblinka. The extermination of the Jewish communities of Poland will be not only the most tragic but also the ugliest chapter in Jewish history, a chapter of Jewish impotence and cowardice. Even our movement has not always stood on the required high level. Instead of giving the signal for desperate resistance, we have everywhere put off making a decision. Even in Warsaw the resistance would have had a different result if it had been started not at the end but at the beginning of the liquidation.

Here in Bialystok it is our fate to live through the last act of the bloody tragedy. What can we do, what ought we do? The way I see it, this is the objective situation. The great majority of the ghetto, of our own family, have been sentenced to death. We are condemned. We have never looked on the woods as a hiding place; we have seen the woods as a base for combat and revenge. But the tens of young people now escaping to the woods are not seeking a battlefield; most of them are living a beggar's life and will doubtless find a beggar's death. In the conditions in which we now find ourselves, our fate would be to lead the same beggar's and vagrant's life.

Only one thing remains for us: to organize collective resistance in the ghetto, at any cost; to consider the ghetto our Musa Dagh, to write a proud chapter of Jewish Bialystok and our movement into history.

I can imagine how others would have reacted if their families had been subjected to what ours have been. The lowest Gentile peasant would have spat on his own life and stuck a knife into the guilty one. The only emotion dominating him would have been the thirst for revenge.

Our duty is clear: with the first Jew to be deported, we must begin our counter-action. If anyone succeeds in taking arms from the murderer and going into the woods —fine. A young person with weapons can find his place in the woods. We still have time to prepare the woods as a place for combat and revenge.

I have lost everything, all those near to me; still, there persists the desire to live. But there is no choice. If I thought that not only individuals could save themselves, but fifty or sixty per cent of the ghetto Jews, I would say that our decision should be to remain alive at any cost. But we are condemned to death.

SARAH: Comrades! If we are concerned about honor, we have long since lost it. In most of the Jewish communities the extermination activities were carried out smoothly, without counter-action. It is better to remain living than to kill five Germans. In a counter-action we will all

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

die, without any possible doubt. On the other hand, in the woods forty or fifty per cent of our people can be saved. That will be our honor and that will be our history. We are still needed; we shall yet be of use. Since in any event we no longer have honor, let it be our duty to remain alive.

ENOCH: No illusions! We have nothing to expect but liquidation to the last Jew. We have a choice of two kinds of death. The woods won't save us, and certainly rebellion in the ghetto won't. There remains for us only to die honorably.

The prospects for our resistance are not good. I don't know whether we have adequate means for combat. It's the fault of all of us that our means are so small, but that's water over the dam—we'll have to use what we have. Bialystok will be liquidated completely, like all the other Jewish cities.

In the first operation the factories were spared, but no one can believe that the Nazis will let them go this time.

It is obvious that the woods offer greater opportunities for revenge, but we must not go there to live on the mercy of peasants, to buy our food and lives for money. Going to the woods should mean going to become active partisans, but that requires arms.

The weapons we have aren't suited to the woods. If we do have enough time left, we should acquire arms and go to the woods.

But if the Nazi action intervenes, we must answer as soon as they touch the first Jew.

CHAIM: There are no Jews left, there are only remnants. There is no more movement, there are only remnants. There is no point in talking about honor; if we can, we must try to save ourselves, and not worry how we'll be judged. We must hide in the woods, and maintain systematic communication among the comrades.

MORDECAI: If we wanted to hard enough, and made up our minds that it was our duty, we could make sure our people were safe to the very end, as long as there were any Jews left in Bialystok. I ask an extreme question: do the comrades who are for the woods propose that we should hide and not react at the next Nazi action, so that we can escape into the woods later?

(*Voices from all sides*: No, No!)

There are two opinions, one represented by Sarah and Chaim, and the other by Hershl and Enoch. Make your choice. One thing is sure—we won't go to the factories and pray to God that the Nazis catch the people who have hidden, so that we can be saved. And we won't watch passively from our factory windows when comrades from another factory are led away.

We can have a vote: Hershl or Chaim.

FANYA (of the Branch): I agree with Enoch. We have to choose between one big action here, or a series of much smaller actions, which in the end will have a much greater significance—I mean escaping into the woods. Because we aren't sufficiently well equipped and don't have the opportunity to go to the woods, and because the situation is very tense, we must emphasize counter-action right here; as soon as the first Jew is seized for deportation, we must attack with all our strength.

But if nothing happens for a few more weeks, we must make every effort to leave.

ELIEZER SUCHANITZKY (of the Branch): Comrades! I think it would be wrong for us to try to work in two directions at the same time. Taking to the woods is a good idea; it gives us some chance to remain alive. But at the present moment, when action is so imminent, going to the woods is an illusion. Even if we have another three or four weeks, we won't be able to assemble all the necessary material and take it with us.

I think there is only one thing for us to do: to answer a Nazi action with our counter-action. I think we should work only along this line, so that we can give the most

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

forceful possible answer with the limited means at our disposal.

JOCHEBED: Why is there all this talk about death? It isn't natural. Even a soldier at the front, or a partisan in the woods, in the greatest danger keeps on thinking about life.

We know what the situation is, but why frighten everybody with all this talk about death? If that's what we should do, let's take to the woods, or remain here and fight it out. That doesn't mean that we must necessarily be killed. Everything we've been saying here is opposed to our most basic instincts.

CHAIM: I don't agree with Jochebed. We must be consistent, we dare not give anyone the moral dispensation to run away. This will be for keeps, not for fun. When we fight, it will have to be to the last. And to fight means to be killed. I think we would be accomplishing more if we remained alive, by taking to the woods.

[He suggests setting up a base outside the ghetto, so that sabotage can be carried on inside the city even after the Nazis act.]

MOSES: In the order of importance, the counter-action comes first; then, if possible, organization of partisan activity in the woods. Everyone here, without exception, should speak his mind, because the lives of all the comrades depend on the decisions made at this meeting. If necessary, let the meeting last until morning.

CHAIM: You want everybody to speak so the meeting should decide against counter-action in the ghetto. (*Protests.*)

DORKE (of the Branch): I think our position must be the position of people in a movement, of people with full consciousness of what they're doing, who know what has happened to our nearest relatives and friends.

We will die a worthy death. The chances for revenge are greater in the woods, but we cannot go there as vagrants, only as active partisans. Since the necessary preparation for the woods is impossible now, we must devote all our energy to the counter-action.

ZIPPORAH: It's hard to say anything, it's hard to choose the manner of your own death. There's a kind of argument going on inside me between life and death. It's not important for me whether I or somebody else will remain alive. After what we have lived through and seen with our own eyes, we shouldn't have too high a notion of the value of our lives. I am trying to think a little more deeply of the question of our movement.

We're proud of the fact that our movement lived through the most difficult period in the history of the Jewish community in Poland. I was brought here from Vilna, and so were many others. There were certainly more important people to save. It wasn't I who was brought here, and it wasn't you; it was the movement. Now the question has been posed: will the movement be destroyed entirely? Does the movement have the right to be destroyed? We are a movement of the Jewish people; we must, and we do in fact, undergo all the sorrows and persecutions of the people.

When we consider the right to stay alive, I say yes, we have every right. Perhaps our movement may have to be the only one to speak up, when that is needed. Take the example of Warsaw. That was certainly a proud and manly death, but it wasn't the kind of thing a movement should do.

The decision of a movement should be to remain alive.

I don't mean we should hold on to life for its own sake, but for continued work, for extending the chain that was not broken even in the darkest days.

Our chances are as small as they can be, but if we put everything we have into our effort, we can succeed.

SHMULIK: This is the first time we have

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

had to hold a meeting about death. We are going to undertake our counter-action not to write history, but to die an honorable death, as young Jews in our times should. And if our history is ever written, it will be different from the history of the Spanish Jews, who leaped into the flames with "Hear, O Israel!" on their lips.

Now, as to the action. All our experience teaches us that we can't trust the Germans, in spite of their assurances that the artisans will be protected, that only those who don't work will be deported, and so on. They have succeeded in driving thousands of Jews to the slaughter only by deception and demoralization.

And yet we have a chance to come out of the impending action safely. Everyone is playing for time, and so should we. In the short time that remains, we can work to improve our small and impoverished store of weapons.

We should also do what we can about the woods, where we can fulfill two functions.

I don't want to be misunderstood. We shouldn't interpret our hiding while the action is taking place as cowardice.

No! Man's instinct for life is so great, and here we must be selfish. I don't care if others are deported in our place. We have a greater claim on life than others, rightly.

We have set an aim in life for ourselves —to remain living at any cost! We were brought here from Vilna because there was a smell of liquidation there, and living witnesses had to remain. We must therefore do everything we can, if there is no liquidation immediately, to wait and gain time.

But if the liquidation starts now, then let it be all of us together in the counter-action, and "let me die with the Philistines."

SARAH: I want the comrades to know that I will do whatever is decided. But I'm amazed by the calmness with which we're talking about all this.

When I see a German, I begin to tremble all over. I don't know whether the comrades, and especially the girls, will have enough strength and courage. I said what I said before because I don't have any faith in my own strength.

EZEKIEL: I don't agree with Sarah. In the face of death you can become weak and powerless, or you can become very strong, since there is nothing to lose. I agree with Shmulik that we should begin our counter-action only in the event of a definite liquidation.

ETHEL: Concretely—if an action is started in the next few days, then our only choice can be a counter-action; but if we are granted more time, we should work along the lines of taking to the woods.

I hope I can be equal to the duties that will be imposed on us. It may be that in the course of events I shall be strengthened. In any case, I am resolved to do everything that needs to be done.

Hershl spoke rightly. We are going to perform a desperate act, whether we want to or not. Our fate is sealed, and there remains for us only the choice between one kind of death and another. I am calm.

MORDECAI: The position of the comrades is clear. We will do everything we can to help as many people as possible escape into the woods for partisan combat. Every one of us who is in the ghetto when the Nazis start their action must react as soon as the first Jew is seized for deportation. We are not going to haggle about our lives; we must understand objective conditions.

The most important thing is this: to maintain until the very end the pride and dignity of the movement.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

RELIGION BY FIAT IN ISRAEL

Ben Gurion Tacks Around the Church-State Issue

HAL LEHRMAN

TEL AVIV

AS A veteran of Passover Week in Tel Aviv, this writer can testify at first hand to the intervention of religious rites and practices in the private lives of all persons, pious or infidel, Jew or Gentile, inhabiting the infant State of Israel. Some unhappy unbelievers are ready to maintain that existence could not possibly have been grimmer, short of a renewed outbreak of the Arab war.

The comparison is exaggerated, but it is true enough that the festival of Passover was not exactly as gay as festivals should be, unless one likes that sort of thing. The matzos, that pale, un-nourishing symbol of ancient woe, was omnipresent and unavoidable. There were seven bleak and unleavened days. According to report, bread could be had by non-Jews, but none of my Gentile friends mustered enough energy in that listless week to go out and search for it. A few heathen-minded bakers trafficked in bootlegged bread; toward the end, somebody at dinner one evening produced a chunk, craftily wrapped in newspapers, from underneath the table, and the company fell ravenously upon it. Beer, being notoriously given to rising (or leavening), was also outlawed throughout the land. Government-sponsored restaurants had to kosherize their eating implements *shel Pesach,* an edict which drove the press corps forth to feed ruinously in high-priced hotel dining rooms because the private concessionaire who runs the correspondents' official mess preferred to go out of business for a week rather than buy new plates, knives, forks, and spoons.

On the first and last Passover days, shops, offices, and factories closed down, and no hand was laid to a plough. Not even Elijah could have goaded back to life the abandoned Kirya, seat of the vacationing government of Israel in its capital of Tel Aviv. Since the holidays fell in the early part of the week, and Friday afternoon and all of Saturday are workless days in Israel anyway, an entire week was effectively lost from the calendar. Impious ones inquired if such was a proper way to do honor to Jehovah, what with a food shortage, a housing shortage, and an overabundance of unabsorbed immigrants threatening the harassed economy of the Holy Land.

TO NULLIFY the risk of having un-Passoverized edibles in circulation, privately-addressed food parcels arriving from America during that week were immobilized at dock or post office until the week was safely over. This Orthodox passion for protecting the dietary morals of the general population goes back to the earliest days of the state, when the Israeli Army was fighting the Arabs inside and on every frontier. Farmhands were scarce, shipping was disrupted, and the food ration was low, but cabinet members from the religious groups consumed much of the Provisional Government's time in vibrant debate against non-kosher meat imports and actually obtained an effective ban on such imports

---

IN THE history of the West, few problems have been of greater importance than that of the relations between church and state. Now in the Middle East, the new State of Israel faces again, and in somewhat different terms, this burning issue. HAL LEHRMAN'S third report from Tel Aviv describes the forms in which the issue has so far appeared in Israel, and the political dilemmas it poses for David Ben Gurion's government and for the various religious groups involved. Mr. Lehrman's earlier reports on the new state ("The Economic Test Facing Israel" and "The Israelis Learn to Govern Themselves") appeared in the June and July issues of COMMENTARY.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

by threatening to resign in the middle of a war. (One of these Orthodox statesmen more recently kept a shipload of immigrants an extra night and day offshore by forbidding dockworkers to labor on the Sabbath.) Kosher meat costs more to import, using up more of the state's foreign exchange and more of the housewife's budget, but the rabbinate, naturally, does not put economics ahead of devotion. The army itself is strictly kosher, by military order, not just in the messhall but also in the foxhole. If an officer can afford it, he will buy himself a hot meal where he can, but the ordinary soldier will eat cold food on Saturdays. The famished garrison at the religious kibbutz of Kfar Etzion, later liquidated by the Arabs, slaughtered a cow and, discovering that the meat was not kosher, threw it away.

In the case of Kfar Etzion, the entire community was devout, and the act of abnegation was, therefore, no infringement of personal liberty. But the religious arm does poke into the affairs of non-religious and anti-religious citizens as well, and not merely in such animal matters as eating and drinking (though before leaving the subject of food let it be added that the hog industry, which might have been a source of income to the Treasury and of satisfaction to unorthodox eaters, has been erased by the rabbinically-endorsed assassination of virtually every pig in Israel).

So far as curtailment of public distractions can insure observance of the Sabbath, that holy day is honored willy-nilly by the city-dwellers of Israel. In Haifa most of the bus routes are unserviced from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday. In Tel Aviv and Jerusalem the buses are completely immobilized. No stores are open, no theaters, no *divertissements* of any kind. If one desires to violate the Sabbath in the matter of locomotion, one may hire a taxi. But taxis in expensive Israel are not a luxury every man can afford.

In this way it comes to pass that the rich man in the parable may go to perdition in an automobile and ride to Tel Aviv beach on a warm Saturday, but the citizen who is short of piasters must trudge five miles or ten for a swim on his one day off or else stew at home and remain a virtuous man.

Even more than the non-zealot who resents having his day of rest tinged with blue, the women of modern Israel may chafe at the antique bonds imposed upon them by the theologians. In marriage and divorce, a woman under this country's present statutes is technically as much a chattel as in Biblical times. There is, first of all, no civil marriage in Israel. One marries under the canopy or not at all. This means, for one thing, that Jew cannot marry Gentile here, unless the Gentile turns Jewish or is an alien whose national law authorizes a consular marriage. For another thing, it means that a wife, being subject to rabbinical law, cannot divorce her husband or make a will without his consent. A divorced woman may not marry a *Kohen* (a descendant of the priesthood). A man may have disappeared into a Nazi crematorium, but his widow may not remarry until she convinces the rabbis that he is dead. A childless widow cannot marry anyone except her deceased spouse's brother unless the latter goes through a religious ceremony formally absolving her from this—which sometimes becomes inconvenient if he is a minor or abroad or just plain nasty. Finally, religious courts have entire jurisdiction over alimony and the confirmation of wills.

It is apparent, then, that religious concern for the canonical purity of the Israeli community puts a curb on individual freedom in fields as prosaic as ham and eggs or as sublime as wedlock. Depending on one's point of view, this might be described as intolerable meddling of the "Church" in personal affairs. Explaining the nature of this "meddling," I have deliberately employed the tone of an annoyed or angry man, to reflect the feelings of some of my Israeli friends. But there are religious-minded people here too, and these do not consider the situation monstrous or even extraordinary. In fact, many of them think that life in Israel could be a good deal more Judaic without harming anyone's body or soul.

Their argument rests on various levels.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

On the lowest, it uses the *tu quoque* method. In New York State, divorce requires a high hocus-pocus of bogus adultery or other unpleasantnesses, yet we hear no New York Jew lamenting that his individual liberties are thereby stifled. In Ireland nobody can be divorced at all, and the same is true of Catholic Italy. Then why be indignant over rabbinical control of divorce in Israel? The rabbis, at least, will grant a divorce if reasonably convinced that they should. If other countries can impose religious and moral restrictions on personal intimacies, why can't the new State of Israel do likewise? The obvious answer to this, of course, is that the foibles of other lands are not necessarily worthy of imitation. Folly elsewhere does not justify folly in Israel, especially since Israel, being new and making a fresh start, could do better than other states where anachronisms are hedged around by long usage.

We move to stronger ideological ground with the argument that a Jewish civic community has the right to prescribe laws for itself in harmony with Jewish custom. This view maintains that, whatever the former religious significance of certain customs, they have become national and social in observance. Judaic practice, it is contended, is not religious in connotation but traditional. The practice is part of the warp and woof of the people. It is a device to protect and preserve the integrity of that people according to its own lights.

In other societies, there is the same sort of protective custom, arbitrarily established at the outset. So, for instance, most communities recognize a ban on marriage between brother and sister, though this is an artificially-imposed taboo, not something inevitable and inescapable by physical circumstance. There are also contemporary examples of restrictive custom, such as the fiat against American fraternization or marriage with German nationals in the earlier phases of the current Occupation. If a limited community like the United States Army has the right to retain its inviolability by arbitrary devices, surely a broad community like Israel, which is a state, may outlaw marriage between Jew and Gentile, prescribe the conduct of a widow, and do anything else it sees fit for its own integrity. The same reasoning applies to kosher food and respect for the Sabbath. As for foreigners, they conform to the laws of the land in which they are residing. Foreign Jews in Israel must similarly conform to the Jewish law.

Taking the offensive, protagonists of the Judaic way of life will contend that their prescriptions are not only justified but good. They see all manner of social benefits, for example, in the guarantee of a day of rest during which all citizens will really rest. "We want to give the world a model for the Sabbath," one earnest though relatively moderate Orthodox member of the Israeli Parliament told me. "We Jews invented the concept of Sabbath, didn't we? Other religions and peoples have copied it, changing the day, not the fundamental meaning. But their application of the idea has grown faulty. In other countries one-sixth or one-fifth of the population work hard on Sunday in order that their neighbors may have the day off. We want *everybody* to have the day off. Even our own Sabbath is unfair to the taxi-drivers and others who go on working. A man has the right to spend one day of the week at peace inside his home, surrounded by his wife and children. It isn't sufficient to give him some other day in the week. He is entitled to the day when his children are not at school and his wife has no cooking duties. Our Sabbath ought to be extended so that every man in the Jewish state may enjoy it as well as every other man. This would not be a restriction on personal liberty but a contribution to it."

THE highest argument of all is one which relies for its justification, not on the communal blessings of a universal Sabbath and other rites, but on the stern obligation to maintain the continuity of the Jewish tradition. This is a duty with two objectives. The first is negative: to prevent in a Jewish state the sensation of alienism which has been the age-old burden of the Jews in non-Jewish society. After two thousand years of discrim-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ination and ostracism because of his essential difference, the Jew has earned the right not to feel different in a state where he is sovereign. That is why, when there is a scarcity of foreign exchange, the imported food must be kosher, so that no good Jew may have to do without kosher meat while his godless neighbor contents himself with pork. That is why, also, the kitchens in the army, the hospitals, and all other government establishments must be kosher. Would it not be intolerable to set up a kind of ghetto messhall to which the Orthodox soldier would have to repair apart from his comrades? This is the army of the Jew and the land of the Jew, and at least in the public institutions which his current taxes and his millenia of cruel sacrifice have helped create he deserves to feel like a whole man at last.

The second objective in preserving the Jewish tradition is positive, aggressive, and, by intention, constructive. For centuries, it is held, Judaism has been on the defensive. Fighting for survival against a host of enemies, it has had to content itself with existing rather than growing. In the past several hundred years it has foregone altogether the impulse to create. But now, under a roof of its own, it has finally won the power and the possibility to expand. Under present circumstances, growth is no longer a mere impulse but a solemn obligation. Here now is the occasion to apply the long frustrated tenets of Judaism to the shaping of a society based on a Jewish way of life, a community accommodated to the pace and complexion of modern times but infused at the core by the spirit which has given Judaism its peculiar distinction throughout the ages.

This high ideal is the professed purpose of the Religious Bloc, a coalition of Orthodox parties which joined ranks for Israel's first elections last January. In its motivations, the bloc is entirely religious, without economic or political overtones. It unites all factions, from the religious Poale Mizrachi to the earlocked Hasidim of the medieval Mea Shearim quarter in Jerusalem. Its platform, as enunciated by Chief Rabbi Isaac H. Herzog, stipulates that the new state give expression in its public life, institutions, and political thought to the principles and traditions of Israel's sacred heritage.

Clearly, there can be large debate over the precise nature of this heritage, over which principles can be applied with profit to mod- parts of it are good and which are bad, which Judaic Code would be neither unfeasible ern living and which can be applied only at the price of reaction. The subject is too large for this writer's available space, to say nothing of his competence. For practical purposes, however, resolution of the debate will be achieved by political means rather than philosophical. If the issue ever becomes crucial, it will be fought out over specific legislative and constitutional programs, not in terms of theological tracts. In this connection, it is interesting to note that a special department of the Ministry of Justice is already examining the corpus of traditional Jewish law to see whether and how it may serve as foundation of a basic law for Israel.

The present laws of Israel are a legacy from the British mandate and the Ottoman Empire. Physically, the fusion of these with Jewish traditional law to form a modernized nor unprecedented. Something of the sort was done when, after the imposition of Roman law on Germanic, Otto von Gierke gave Germany a new Civil Code which was a wedding of Roman and Germanic as adapted by English common law. There are lawyers in Israel capable of arranging a similar match.

Jewish legal doctrine goes beyond the Ten Commandments, the Bible, and the Talmud to the rich treasury of *shallahs,* judgments and annotative literature from the centuries of magistral rabbis and their courts. A characteristic of this tradition is its ethical and moral tone, its insistence on the wholeness of life and the dignity of the individual. This is a mood which might well be borrowed by any modern code. While not absolutely opposed to capital punishment, Jewish justice was very reluctant to apply it. (The Talmud speaks shudderingly of one court which, in a span of seventy years, passed a single sentence of death.) Jewish legal tra-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

dition also speaks out against nullification of claims through lapse of time and against acceptance of testimony from disputing parties. Such intellectual principles could be easily and worthily applied in the formulation of an Israeli codex.

Significantly, however, the same tradition which bars a litigant from testifying against his opponent also denies the right of women to bear witness. Rabbinical judges are willing to listen to women in court but not to recognize their testimony as formally valid. This discrimination, inherited from Biblical folkways, gives Jewish law an Oriental aroma hardly acceptable to modern nostrils. Again, a woman may not inherit under Jewish law. Widows have the right to a specified sum from the deceased husband, and daughters have the right to their dowries, but the sons get the inheritance. This may have made sense in the days of Abraham and Isaac, when wealth meant land and it was the man who worked the land, but it would not go down well in modern times. It certainly did not suit the mandatory government. The British gave rabbinical courts a jurisdiction over maintenance of divorced women and probate of wills but withheld jurisdiction over other questions of personal status, such as inheritance and succession, unless all parties involved were willing. The Israeli government has adopted an identical procedure and has steadily resisted rabbinical pressure to extend the authority of the religious courts over personal status.

Even such differences can conceivably be overcome by good will. The rabbinate right now is evolving a formula to abolish discrimination against women, with strong hope of persuading the Ministry of Justice to increase the scope of rabbinical jurisdiction thereafter. But an insuperable obstacle to a corpus of Mosaic-inspired law would arise if a diehard rabbinate should insist that such a code be holy and unalterable. It might be possible to write a code acceptable both to rabbi and layman and then secure its passage through Parliament. But neither the country nor the Knesset, as presently constituted, would agree to recognizing it as sacred writ, or as anything but a body of rules which men have written and which men may therefore revise.

THERE is little likelihood, however, that any fundamental discussion of a Judaic Code or of the church-state problem will occur for a substantial time to come. Such discussion would be too hazardous at this juncture, when Israel needs maximum unity for more urgent matters. The extent of this danger showed itself when a draft Constitution was published by Dr. Leo Kohn, an expert on constitutional law serving now in the Israeli Foreign Office. Agudath Israel pounced on Kohn for failing to affirm that the constitution should be founded on the Torah; the Marxist Mapam pummeled him for giving thanks to Almighty God, for including religious courts in the permanent structure of the state, and for suggesting that legislation should "be guided by the basic principles of Jewish law." Since then, little has been heard officially of the learned doctor's paper, and all signs indicate that the Israeli government intends to proceed indefinitely without any constitution at all.

As long as the issue is not pushed forward, it is safe to predict that the country will avoid any serious bitterness over religious infringement of private liberties or, conversely, over failure to establish a theocratic state. As always, there are a certain number of fanatics. Some fellow-travelers, outdoing the Kremlin, talk as if the Sabbath were a criminal offense. On the other hand, I have seen bearded patriarchs parading inside sandwich-man signs which excoriated Sabbath smokers, and in the more fervent districts of Jerusalem drivers have been pulled from government vehicles for daring to ride on the day of rest. But these are infrequent aberrations. Generally, both sides of public opinion are willing to live and let live.

Indeed, considering how many centuries the Orthodox have been painfully awaiting their hour of fulfillment, it might even be argued that they are showing admirable tolerance now that the prophecy has been vindicated and Israel redeemed. Things happen

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

quietly every day in Israel which would be regarded as execrable abominations if religion were really in power. On Seder night at the kibbutz of Givat Brenner, to cite one instance, there was yeast in the cake, a brass band, and a Haggadah rewritten to include the history of the colony; at some kibbutzim the Israeli Declaration of Independence was part of the recitative.

The other side has been at least as tolerant. On the two matters of ritual where disagreement might have been gravest—circumcision and the Sabbath—hygienic and social considerations have happily assisted an amicable attitude toward the religious position. Easy identification of the Sabbath and other rabbinical requirements with tradition and patriotism has also smoothed the way. Jewish history, interwoven with ancient Hebrew rites and customs, exerts a strong pull on the sentiments of the Israeli in the street and his representatives in Parliament. Last Spring, when the date for the first anniversary of Independence Day was being selected, a suggestion to stand by the Gregorian calendar and celebrate on May 14th was shouted down from all sides of the Knesset. The fifth day of Iyar, which fell on May 14 in 1948 but on May 4 this year, was triumphantly carried. There is nothing particularly holy about the calendar of the Hebrews, but Parliament's loyalty to it is symptomatic.

THE government of David Ben Gurion has been steering a careful middle course through the theological sea. The route is fixed by the manner in which that government was formed and by the nature of the political coalition on which the government's existence depends.

The Ben Gurion cabinet is composed of seven Mapainiks, from the Premier's own moderate Socialist party, three members of the Religious Bloc, one bourgeois Progressive, and one Sephardic representative. This heterogeneous collection has only one reason for hanging together: its common agreement to postpone basic social dispute until Israel's present foreign and domestic crises have been weathered. Mapai has forty-six seats in Parliament—fifteen short of a majority. But the Mapai-led government does have a majority, thanks to the sixteen seats of the Religious Bloc. Arrayed against the coalition are mainly the fourteen votes of Menachem Beigin's ex-Irgunist Herut Party and the nineteen votes of Mapam, where the ultra-left wing of Israeli socialism dwells. The four seats of the Communists and the seven of the conservative General Zionists cannot exert decisive influence; Herut is too sore over old and new grievances to be conciliated and too far to the Right to be anything but an opponent; but Mapam is closest to Mapai in socialist ideology and therefore its most dangerous competitor for working-class support, especially since it is the second largest party in the country.

The normal coalition would have been Mapai-Mapam. But Ben Gurion was reluctant to continue his collaboration in the previous Provisional Government with an extremist, pro-Soviet Mapam, and the latter helped him resist by demanding, as its price for entry into the new government, almost as much power as it could have claimed if it had won the elections. Ben Gurion turned to the one alternative which could relieve him from dependence on Mapam—a union with the Religious Bloc. The Sephardic and Progressive groups were brought in to give the coalition a broader base and nine more seats. But it was the sixteen Orthodox votes which were essential. The terms of the contract were and remain a minimally controversial program of national defense and development, and a strict maintenance of the status quo on everything else, in particular on the fundamental structure of the country. The Religious Bloc won three places in the cabinet and a promise that Caesar in Israel would take virtually nothing which had not been his under the Mandate. Mapai won security from its embarrassing Socialist cousins on the Left. Both partners in the coalition gave up—for the duration of their marriage—the right to wage crusades for Israel's salvation either by divine intercession or by Karl Marx.

Ben Gurion means to hold off an atomiz-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ing squabble over fundamental issues as long as there is a hostile Arab world and a vast economic crisis to confront. This is the key to his policy on the church-state problem. His status-quo pact with the Orthodox clarifies everything he has conceded or failed to concede to the rabbis. Defending the continuation from the Mandate of religious jurisdiction over certain phases of personal status, he told critics in the Knesset that tampering with these rights would mean "tearing at the roots of the Jewish soul." He also declared blandly that a man could eat kosher meat without pain and could love his wife and have children even though married under the *chupeh*—but he declined to outlaw civil marriage in the government program or ban non-kosher meat by decree. One of the first acts of the new Israel proclaimed the Sabbath and other religious holidays as days of rest—but deliberately omitted to define what "rest" meant and how it was to be observed. Throughout, the emphasis has been on administrative action rather than on the writing of basic laws for religious privilege. Wherever feasible, the practice of Israel has patterned itself on procedure handed along by the Mandate.

Thus, the busses do not run in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem on Saturday because they did not run in the time of the British, and in Haifa some of the busses run because that also is what they did before Israel became a state. Stores are closed on the Sabbath by *municipal* ordinance, just as they were under the mandate, and not by governmental statute. Ham is kept out of the country not by formal prohibition but by quiet instructions to the appropriate officials that foreign exchange should not be made available for its import. On the other hand, though the post-offices in Tel Aviv are shut on Saturday, it is no longer necessary to trek to heathen Jaffa to make a telephone call or send a telegram. The Ben Gurion attitude has consistently been that sweet reason must prevail—at least until a strong and solidified Israel may permit itself the pleasure of wrangling over the number of angels who can dance on the point of a pin.

As of now, the Religious Bloc seems content to abide by this truce on disputation. Privately, it professes to believe that its strength among the voters is much greater than the last elections would suggest. It argues that many men with ardent religious conviction voted for the parties of Right and Center and even for Mapai. This is undoubtedly true. The religious issue not having been sharply drawn in the elections, a substantial number of voters made their choice on the basis of purely secular political considerations and voted for other groups. These votes were not necessarily against religion, and many of them may swing over behind Orthodoxy if a *Kulturkampf* flares up. Even in hasidic Jerusalem, there were many who chose Ben Gurion's party simply because it had demonstrated its capacity for government by successfully feeding the Holy City during the siege. This trend was not obstructed by the Premier's shrewd move in turning over control of food import licenses to the Ministry of Religious Affairs shortly before the elections, thereby clinching his reputation for piety among the devout.

But the Orthodox groups are also aware that the present coalition gives them advantages they would not enjoy if they had to rely entirely on their own registered voting strength. They know, too, that many Mapainiks are already fretting over the concessions to religion. The coalition might conceivably split if the Orthodox strove loudly for more. In that event, a Mapai union with the anti-religious Mapam might ensue, which is probably the last thing in the world the religious factions want. As a result, the Bloc is biding its time. It has yielded its dream of a Mosaic Israel for now—but not forever.

The time for that will be closer, the Orthodox feel, when the massive immigration today underway is summoned to express its views at the next general elections some four years hence. The Bloc expects strong support from the new East European arrivals, less likely than their predecessors to be ideological, socializing Zionists and more likely to be plain, traditional Jews. It counts even

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

more on the flood from North Africa, the Middle East, and far corners of the globe like Yemen in southern Arabia. Hardly distinguishable to the western eye from Arabs either in dress, speech, or hygiene, most of these "Oriental" Jews have for centuries had little beyond their religion to comfort them and set them apart. I have seen Yemenites in Aden, down at the nethermost tip of the Arabian peninsula, walk barefoot to their synagogues and chant their inbred hymns with a fervor approaching the ecstatic before boarding planes chartered by the American Joint Distribution Committee for a "magic carpet" flight to Israel. Such material, if the Religious Bloc can organize it, may swell the Orthodox total visibly the next time the ballots are counted.

The disrupting *Kulturkampf* which Ben Gurion wisely dreads is by no means imminent or inevitable. Israel can keep busy for years without encountering the need for a final settlement between church and state. But the elements of a first-class row on the subject are decidedly present. If the religious groups grow too strong, they will need great statesmanship to avoid betraying their impatience for a greater measure of theocracy than is now in vogue. The one thing which is sure is that the free-thinkers, and those who worship Zion as a national rather than doctrinal creed, will rise vigorously to any challenge from the Old Testamenters.

The warning has been unmistakably struck in the memoirs of Chaim Weizmann. "Whereas the State will treat with the highest respect the true religious feeling of the Community," Israel's first President writes, "it cannot put the clock back by making religion the cardinal principle in the conduct of the State. Religion should be relegated to the synagogue and the homes of those families that want it; it should occupy a special position in the schools; but it shall not control the ministries of state. I have never feared really religious people. . . . It is the new, secularized type of rabbi . . . who is the menace, and who will make a heavy bid for power." This is either too hard or too easy on many religious leaders who, if they ever make that "bid for power," will do so less for themselves than for what they believe zealously to be the glorification of Jehovah and His people. But when and if they do, they will stir up a conflict which will resound throughout world Jewry.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE KNICKERBOCKER CASE

A Report on the Current Crusade

MORRIS FREEDMAN

THERE is being acted out in New York, in a kind of slow motion, with great gaps between the significant scenes, a public drama with a cast which occasionally reaches into the thousands. Its ceremonial, almost ritual character, the solemnity of the actors and their often vigorously symbolical behavior, give it some of the qualities of an elaborate pageant. The opening curtain rose on April 9, 1945.

On that day, four members of the Romance Languages Department of the City College of New York sent a letter to the president of the College to be forwarded to the city's Board of Higher Education, on which sit the "trustees" of the institution. The four members were Elliot H. Pollinger, Ephraim Cross (both Jewish), Otto Müller, and Pedro Bach-y-Rita. Their letter asserted that "the Department has long been sharply divided into two opposing groups. The opponents of the Chairman [William E. Knickerbocker] for at least seven years have been subjected to continual harassment and what looks very much like discrimination. . . ." In a later letter, in answer to a request from the Board, the complainants elaborated on their charge of discrimination. "Opponents of Professor Knickerbocker's regime," they wrote, "have been subject to such academic disadvantages as less desirable schedules, interference with outside studies, annoying class arrangements. . . ." The Board called upon the president of the College, Harry N. Wright, and the general faculty (all members with tenure) to hold "a prompt and complete investigation." On May 22, 1945, the Special Faculty Committee assigned to the investigation asked the complainants to submit evidence in support of their allegations. On September 27, 1945, some four months later, after several communications of a more or less unspecific nature had passed between the Committee and the complainants, the four instructors accused Professor Knickerbocker of anti-Semitism.

Thus began what has since come to be known as "The Knickerbocker Case." As soon as the charge of anti-Semitism was introduced, the original one of maladministration was all but forgotten. Repercussions resulting from the injection of the issue of anti-Semitism were immediate and widespread. The Faculty Committee conducted the first of several investigations. The Board of Higher Education itself, the New York City Council, and the American Jewish Congress, all launched inquiries. The New York State Commissioner of Education is now engaged in still another investigation, this one, it has been claimed by some of the participants in the case, of the Board of Higher Education's investigation. There have been two strikes at the College's uptown campus by students, one a sit-down, the other a walk-out that was described on the first day by some newspapers as a "near riot." A number of law-suits have been filed. Several lesser

---

THE "Knickerbocker Case," in which a professor at New York's City College has been accused of anti-Semitism, has been in the news, off and on, for a long time; students have walked out of their classrooms, charges and countercharges by various individuals and organizations have filled the press—and yet the complex facts of the case are by no means well known, even to some of those most passionately committed. MORRIS FREEDMAN here attempts to unravel the tangled net in which those involved in the case have been caught, and to suggest some of the implications of this type of "social action" for the fight against anti-Semitism. Mr. Freedman was born in New York in 1920 and is a graduate of City College. He has contributed short stories and articles to a number of national magazines.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

peripheral incidents have also taken place, somewhat more difficult to discern, like the circular ripples eddying out after a splash.

THE results of the early investigations, in which dozens and dozens of volumes of testimony and exhibits were gathered, had something for everybody. The Faculty Committee, consisting of two Jewish and two non-Jewish members, submitted a one hundred and twenty-five page report to the President in which it found no basis for the charges of anti-Semitism and suggested that the complainants themselves were guilty of misconduct in bringing such charges. It recommended to the President that disciplinary action be taken against them. (As yet, the President has done nothing to carry out this recommendation.) The Board of Higher Education, which contains several Jews, concluded after its own extensive examination that there was no basis for the charges of anti-Semitism and that the whole dispute "arose from factionalism and clashes of personality. . . ." The New York City Council, which has no immediate jurisdiction over the College, found Knickerbocker guilty of "reprehensible" behavior and suggested that he retire. The American Jewish Congress, which was interested in finding a legal basis for the removal of Knickerbocker, conducted a preliminary search of the facts and concluded at that time that there was insufficient evidence on which to base a legal action. (This study by the Congress, by the way, was not widely publicized.)

Knickerbocker was almost at once adjudged guilty by certain elements in the community at large. Most newspapers, though handling the story with kid gloves, generally seemed to favor Knickerbocker's accusers, perhaps because they were supplied with abundant copy by the complainants and their associates. Knickerbocker, the College administration, and the Board made few statements, and these were sparse and coldly official. The impression one got from some reports, mostly those in the Communist, "progressive" (of the Henry Wallace variety), and heavily Zionist-oriented press, was that a vicious anti-Semite was loose on the faculty and was being shielded by the administration, itself probably anti-Semitic. Typical comments contributing to this impression were: ". . . the Board of Higher Education defends the racists . . . "; " . . . the Knickerbockers revelled and looked for new deeds of anti-Semitic derring-do." This wing of the press demanded the summary removal of Knickerbocker without trial, without appeal, and with no apparent consideration for his "civil rights." Individuals, Jews as well as Gentiles, who suggested that the case be studied more calmly, in the light of facts and other important considerations (such as, for instance, the problem of the best way of combatting anti-Semitism in this situation), were denounced as lick-spittles, cowards, toadies, belly-crawlers. Some Jewish organizations, ordinarily sensitive almost to the point of paranoia to intervention by religious denominations in secular schooling, found themselves intervening against Knickerbocker with a vengeance. Liberals, who as a rule jealously guard the academic provinces from trespassing politicians and pressure groups, found themselves ignoring their own prohibitions and trampling campus clover. High emotion reigned.

FROM the earliest days of the Knickerbocker case, "left-wing" groups (including Communists, near-Communists, and those significantly silent on the subject of Communism) have diligently worked on the matter. They have not had much enthusiastic student support. A demonstration against Knickerbocker at a basketball game in Madison Square Garden was denounced by many students. A sit-down strike in the Great Hall outside President Wright's office enlisted only a small minority. Hillel, prominent in the attempt to publicize the charge against Knickerbocker, refused at first to link the Knickerbocker case with that of William H. Davis, former administrator of Army Hall, a campus dormitory, who was accused of anti-Negro bias. The leftists kept joining the two affairs. (Davis admitted making an error of judgment in assigning Negro students to the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

same rooms without asking them if this was what they wanted. He insisted that he was free of any prejudice. After a faculty investigation, he was removed from his post and reassigned to teaching economics.) These left-wing organizations, which had their own reasons for wishing to stir up a fuss, were joined by certain Jewish groups whose notion of political action in a democracy is apparently that of a mindless, "militant" anti-anti-Semitism. The instinctive protest of the latter, freed from the bonds of reason and responsibility, served well the ulterior motives of the former.

The real chance to connect Knickerbocker and Davis came when Judge Hubert T. Delaney, a Negro, resigned from an alumni investigating body, charging that the administration was actively protecting Knickerbocker and Davis. After a series of quick, complex parliamentary maneuvers, in which some saw the fine hand of the leftists, the student body of the uptown campus, in a referendum, approved by a vote of 2,797 to 1,885 a strike to force the immediate suspension of Knickerbocker and Davis pending an open trial. (The total enrollment at that particular center is about seven thousand.) It should be noted that, as a result of the vote, this strike was sponsored by the Student Council, which is in no way leftist. The evening session of the same campus joined the strikers. However, the School of Business Student Council, at 23rd Street, condemned the strike by an overwhelming vote.

The strike waned after the first day and petered out by the third, perhaps partly because of student antipathy to the proprietary way the leftists and their off-campus friends approached the strike. (A number of left-wing community and union groups, representing "citizen opinion," visited the campus to demand action of the President.) The strike accomplished almost nothing in relation to Knickerbocker and Davis, who are still teaching. It was claimed that the strike forced the State Commissioner of Education to agree to examine the handling of the Knickerbocker case, but the Commissioner's examination had been going on for some time.*

Of course, the strike did bring the College once again into national prominence, but since it was impossible for the papers to describe the background of the strike in anything resembling its true complexity, it is difficult to say how or in what direction it affected the attitude of the country at large about either anti-Semitism or City College.

IT WAS perhaps natural that an accusation of anti-Semitism should turn out to be explosive—at this time, at this place. If Jews in America may be said to have a secular college, that institution is City College. From the time the sons and daughters of the immigrants of the turn of the century reached college age, the College has had a predominantly Jewish undergraduate body, something around seventy per cent. The presence of anti-Semites on the faculty of such an institution, especially after Hitler, would obviously strike most of the public as scandalous.

However, what has shocked many persons even more—persons who are no friends of anti-Semitism, inside and outside the College, Jews and Gentiles—was the crusading vengefulness with which the campaign against Knickerbocker was conducted. The impression that the complainants and their friends created was that when anti-Semitism is an issue, all normal judicial presumptions and processes may be suspended. Charges alone, to them, were sufficient grounds for the carrying out of sentence. In a letter to the Board, after they had appeared at only one hearing of the Faculty Committee, the complainants wrote: "We believe that we have revealed enough of the monster that has been gnawing the vitals of the City College for seven, to us, terrible years. We there-

* Actually the Commissioner is specifically looking into charges made by Pollinger and Bach-v-Rita that they have been removed from the departmental promotion list in violation of their legal rights. The two men were penalized by their department as the result of the Faculty Committee decision that they had behaved improperly in charging Knickerbocker with anti-Semitism.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

fore ask . . . that the incriminated . . . be promptly brought to justice."

Crude forms of intimidation were used. Three students, not members of the class, entered one of Davis's courses on the first day of the semester, pretended to be members, asked Davis whether he was the man charged with anti-Negro bias, and, when he said yes, dramatically stalked out of the room. The student who led seventeen of the eighteen members out of one of Knickerbocker's sections, after a similar cross-examination, also was not registered in the class. One Jewish organization adopted the tone of the complainants and dismissed evidence indicating no anti-Semitism on the part of Knickerbocker as not "genuine." It also suggested that Knickerbocker be suspended for his own safety, put into protective custody as it were, because his presence on the campus was an element leading to unrest and student disturbance (to which, of course, this organization was contributing by its vigorous attacks on Knickerbocker and the administration). A number of student groups found themselves joining the hue and cry against Knickerbocker because, as one Jewish student leader put it: "We don't dare to be independent in this affair, however we may personally feel. They'd accuse us of being anti-Semitic and reactionary."

DURING all the turmoil, few stopped to inquire into the exact nature of Knickerbocker's supposed guilt. The charges against Knickerbocker were four: that he had discriminated against the Jewish complainants because of their Jewishness; that during his tenure he had recommended no Jews for more than trivial appointments (two substitutes for short periods, and an office assistant), although twenty-one non-Jews were hired; that he had caused a medal for proficiency in French to be withheld from a Jewish student, Morton Gurewitch, and had awarded it to a non-Jew with a record that could be interpreted as being slightly inferior; that he had made "oral statements derogatory to or showing bias against the Jewish people."

The first charge was disposed of when it was shown that the other Jewish members in the Department had on the whole received as good if not better treatment than their non-Jewish colleagues. As for the second charge, it would be difficult to saddle Knickerbocker with exclusive responsibility for the non-hiring of Jews, since, in theory, a democratically chosen appointments committee selects instructors. In addition, one would have to prove that a substantial number of Jews did apply during this period, and that they were at least as competent as the non-Jews who were hired. The case of the French medal is tangled up in a clerical and statistical web. Morton Gottschall, Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Science, a Jew, testified that the medal was not awarded to Gurewitch because of a recording error in his office. It has been claimed, however, that Gurewitch should have received the medal on the basis of his record up to the time of the error, and also that he would not have been awarded it even without the error. (A duplicate medal was recently awarded to Gurewitch as a direct result of the City Council investigation. According to the papers, Gurewitch didn't even bother to acknowledge the delayed honor.) At any rate, the matter of the medal cannot clearly be laid at Knickerbocker's door, although some of the complainants have intimated that Dean Gottschall was covering up for Knickerbocker. The charge that remains, therefore, is the one about making anti-Semitic remarks and jokes.

One of the oddest angles of a case in which there are so many queer angles is that the principal witness to bring this charge was Professor Otto Müller, one of the complainants, who had himself long been regarded, in corridor conversation, as being something less than an enemy of anti-Semitism. (No section of the press friendly to Knickerbocker's opponents mentions this aspect of Müller's past.) Up to the time that Knickerbocker failed to back him for promotion to a full professorship, Müller was Knickerbocker's supporter and close friend.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He admitted to the Board's committee that he had joined the complainants to "sabotage" Knickerbocker's regime.

Müller testified that Knickerbocker used the term "kike" frequently, that he referred often to "those Jews and their by-laws" (the by-laws of the Board of Higher Education granting certain democratic rights to faculty members, such as the right to select their own departmental chairmen and committees at periodic intervals, the right of tenure, and so on; it is these rights, among other things, that make teaching at City College so attractive to many men), that he had stated "Hitler was all right when he attacked the Jews . . . ," and had told Muller this joke during the war: "The Battle Hymn of the Jews is 'Onward, Christian soldiers, we'll make the uniforms.'"

Under the circumstances, Müller hardly appeared to be the best witness to another's anti-Semitism. His word seemed, to the Board of Higher Education, to be no more credible than Knickerbocker's, and Knickerbocker denied most of the charges. Müller's presence in the ranks of the complainants also somewhat vitiated the affidavits submitted by a few others to Professor Cross alleging that they had heard Knickerbocker make nasty remarks about Jews. (None of the three other complainants, including Professor Cross, the most vigorous proponent of the charge of anti-Semitism, testified to ever hearing anti-Semitic comments from Knickerbocker.) This is the kind of remark Knickerbocker is supposed to have made to the men who gave affidavits to Cross: "These students are different. More than two-thirds of the students are Jewish. They are always trying to put something over; they have no respect for authority and you can't treat them like gentlemen."

ONE man closely connected with the College put his dilemma concerning the evidence of anti-Semitism on Knickerbocker's part this way: "Müller was accepted by the foes of anti-Semitism in the case as an ally, apparently only on his word, in spite of his not unambiguous reputation. Now Knickerbocker declared to the Board's Committee: 'I may have said that there are Jews, and I may have added Christians, who cannot be treated as gentlemen, but to say that most of them are "cheap Jews" and that they cannot be treated as gentlemen, is contrary to any belief I have ever possessed.' It is true that Knickerbocker admitted to the Board's committee that he heard and repeated the obnoxious joke about the Battle Hymn of the Jews, although he said he believed it was first told to him by Müller when they were still cronies. But, in the absence of conclusive evidence to the contrary, it would seem that Knickerbocker's word on whether or not he is anti-Semitic is at least as good as his accuser's.

"But suppose that the charges of Knickerbocker's making unpleasant remarks about Jews were absolutely true, what then? It has not been claimed that he made any offensive remarks to Jews themselves. It has not been satisfactorily proved that his remarks and his ideas resulted in any discriminatory actions. Has a man the right, the democratic or merely human right, to *think* thoughts derogatory to Jews on occasion, even to speak so in the company of like-minded persons? Offhand, one might say so, although obviously City College is hardly the most congenial place for a man who follows such a pattern consistently."

It was apparently on the basis of such considerations that Hillel in the early stages of the discussion urged merely that Knickerbocker resign from the chairmanship of his department and possibly retire altogether from the faculty on his regular pension. In the eyes of many, the most Knickerbocker seems to be demonstrably guilty of in relation to anti-Semitism is indiscretion in bringing his sentiments into the College, even if only to men like Müller. Of course, the charge of maladministration still remains.

MANY associates of the College considered the charges against Knickerbocker ironic, for it is common knowledge that the faculty has had, and still has, men who have been much more outspokenly anti-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Jewish. One professor on his retirement issued a violently anti-Semitic blast opposing the appointment of a refugee Jew in his department. An instructor, while apparently under the influence of liquor, was heard to remark loudly in a public bus: "The best damned thing that ever happened to America was when that Jew in the White House, Rosenfeld, died." Then there are the men who used to make comments that in their unqualified baldness struck many as being anti-Jewish but were really only foolish. One teacher, intending his question as a joke, used to challenge students with non-Jewish names: "What was your name before it was Roberts? Rabinowitz?" Another professor, very amiable and widely beloved, used to tell unruly Jewish students that he would define for them, with reference to courtesy, the difference between a "sheenie" and a Jew. (Incidentally, no evidence was offered of Knickerbocker ever making such remarks in class, although he is reputed to be a martinet and is supposed to fail more than the usual average of students.)

Instances of this kind can probably be multiplied. But the College has over the years worked out its own informal methods, no doubt not quite perfect, for dealing with such phenomena. The genuine anti-Semites on the faculty, who are probably in a negligible minority (how does one make a census of anti-Semites in America?) are tagged, if mildly tolerated, and can hope for little in the way of advancement. Other men who have made foolish slips of the tongue have been reproved and even punished. One prominent professor was transferred from the main campus to the business school (occasionally used as a kind of Siberia) after a quite meaningless remark of this kind. When an alumni committee recently visited the College after much preparatory publicity to hear evidence of bias on the faculty, it had to abandon its investigation because no one showed up to testify.

THE city at large has reacted to the Knickerbocker mess with a certain discomfort, both because of the issue of anti-Semitism and because the College was once again in the news. Jewish groups that could not automatically align themselves with those demanding Knickerbocker's summary dismissal were embarrassed. If one took a stand for Knickerbocker's right not to be fired, it was possible to be accused of anti-Semitism regardless of whether one happened to be a Jew oneself; if one opposed his right to teach, it was possible to be accused of succumbing to a lynch spirit. This general confusion caused one prominent newspaper to straddle the issue editorially, suggesting to the students that Knickerbocker had been punished sufficiently (for what crime it did not say) by all of the publicity and that they should not "demand their pound of flesh" by insisting on his removal. Many persons, caught in the ever thickening web of developments, were completely bewildered. (One contribution toward chaos was the initiation during the height of the case of a movement to ban the *Merchant of Venice* and *Oliver Twist* from city classrooms.) Others who felt that something certainly had to be done about anti-Semitism of whatever sort on the faculty were unconvinced that the tactics adopted were exactly those that would bring meaningful results. For enemies of the principle of free higher education were quick to use the case as another reason to close down the College, on the basis of a logic that was apparently two-edged: both because there were anti-Semites on the faculty and because students protested against them. Certainly, the College's aspirations in budgetary matters, particularly its present desire to enlarge its physical holdings by buying the near-by Manhattanville College campus and buildings for three million dollars, were made considerably more difficult of realization.

The College's curious place in the community was at the root of some of the peculiarities of the Knickerbocker case. The College is the only major institution of its kind in the country to be supported entirely by a municipality. For many years, the College has been enriching the city, the state, and the nation with its graduates—teachers, doc-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tors, engineers, statesmen. Yet it has long been handled as an orphan by the city, enjoying only a begrudged marginal existence. (Under Mayor O'Dwyer, who has a prominent alumnus in his administration, conditions have improved somewhat.) Its graduates have been subjected, often by College officials, to constant reminders of their debt for having received a free college education. During its early history, City College was an important instrument in the "Americanization" (inevitably paternalistic) of the immigrant and his children; though that era has long since passed, many members of the faculty and administration tend to keep at a patronizing distance from the students and to speak in accents of condescension. Not long ago, alumni received requests for donations to the College's Centennial Fund that seemed to imply an obligation on their part to pay back the "charity" they had received.

THE city's attitude has been in part responsible for the gulf that exists between students and faculty. As in the conventional state treatment of orphans generally, the city asks, in return for the shelter it gives the College, only that it not be a nuisance. Thus controversial appointments, for one thing, are usually out of the question. And since men of academic stature often have independent and original minds, sure to offend someone if only crackpots, the College has usually tried to play safe and has hired or built up perfectly inoffensive personages. This state of feeling has been especially prominent ever since the disgraceful exhibition that kept Bertrand Russell from joining the faculty. (A substantial section of the faculty, by the way, put up a vigorous fight for Russell.) As a corollary of this general principle of caution, it has been felt by certain elements in the College that those of its own graduates who wish to join the faculty are less to be depended on to fit into the pattern than, say, mid-Westerners.

The composition of the faculty has long been such as to give the erroneous impression of being the result of active anti-Semitism. For example, although four students out of five are Jewish—to use the general estimate, which may be slightly conservative—only about one instructor out of every five is Jewish.* About the same proportion appears among administrative officials. But the small number of Jews may be explained by a variety of reasons. For one thing, in company with other institutions, the College has generally followed a policy of not "inbreeding." Naturally, such a policy has operated to keep Jews off the faculty, since no other college in the country graduates so many Jews as does City. (However, it is probably also true that no other college in the country has such a high proportion of Jews on its faculty as does City.) The College is periodically overtaken by a will-o-the-wisp wish to "go native" along the pattern of a rah-rah state university. Graduates of such institutions are sought after, and press releases concentrate on sports, co-ed activities, freshman-sophomore conflicts, slapstick human interest, and the like; generally neglected is what has made the College famous: its intellectual richness. Another reason for the scarcity of Jews is that until recently there have not been many Jews qualified to teach in the College—the PhD, which is required by law, is costly, both in time and money.

Whatever the explanation, there exists a serious alienation between students and the men responsible for their education. (There was once a dean of students, a Southerner, who greeted all undergraduates who came to him with problems—usually at the beginning of the term, in connection with registration—by pulling out a roll of bills and genially drawling, "Sure, son, anything to

*The Teachers Union, which is leftist-oriented, recently issued some startling statistics purporting to show that while most Jewish teachers on probation were not being taken on with tenure, almost all non-Jewish probationers were. While the figures seem to be authentic, two comments must be made about them. First, the four departments on which the statistics are based were selected, perhaps precisely to obtain these statistics. Also, the College has been appointing young Jewish teachers almost in droves before they have completed all their academic requirements. Since many cannot finish their doctoral work before their probation is over, they must, by the letter of the law, be let go. Their places may be filled by other Jewish young men.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

help. How much do you need?") One non-alumnus instructor, who has established a warm rapport with his students, once commented sardonically to a colleague that the teachers at the College are looked upon with contempt by the top-heavy administration because they must maintain contact with classes. Faculty members are often "rewarded" by being assigned to non-teaching posts which do not necessarily carry more pay. It has even happened in some departments that instructors, alumni and non-alumni, became suspect and endangered their chances for promotion when it was learned that they were popular with their students.

ALTHOUGH something of the genesis and the development of the Knickerbocker case may be found in this chasm between the students and their teachers, the strike and the public eruption of the case seem rather traceable to the almost total estrangement of the *administration* and the students.

Throughout the preparations for the strike, the administration made no serious attempt to head it off by vigorously presenting its position. It is true that the President held regular open forums in his office, and that Dean John Theobald kept his door open to all comers to answer questions, but only a handful of students were reached in this way. In class discussions during and after the strike, it came out that most students were uninformed and misinformed about the issues and facts of the Knickerbocker case, having got much of their knowledge and many of their attitudes from the very vocal left-wing groups or from the garbled and superficial accounts in the rest of the press. The administration's infrequent public statements merely reiterated the bare facts: that Knickerbocker and Davis had been duly tried; that Knickerbocker had been found innocent; and that Davis had been sufficiently punished by removal from his Army Hall post. (So far as can be determined, the administration has still made no satisfactory statement on its approval of a raise in salary for Davis—almost fourteen hundred dollars annually—after he had been removed from his administrative job. Of course, Davis took a loss in pay, something around three thousand dollars, when he was sent back to teaching. But, many ask, if his transfer was in the nature of a punishment, why was almost half of his salary-cut restored? It has been suggested that Davis was known not to be guilty at the time of his removal but that the atmosphere at the moment demanded a "fall guy," and that the salary increment was partial compensation for his having had to assume such a role.)

After the strike started, the attitude of the administration and some members of the faculty was akin to the by now largely outmoded attitude of the management of a large corporation which assumes in a strike that it is at "war" with its employes, with whom it has no common interest. At a general faculty meeting, one dean urged that the administration refuse to discuss the issues with the students until they called off their strike and returned to classes. Other faculty members insisted that the "kids" were merely using the strike as an opportunity to play hookey—a comment that could only be made by a visitor from Mars about City College students. Wildly exaggerated stories were spread of students and alumni being summarily fired when employers read about the strike.

ANY public matter as involved as the Knickerbocker case inevitably brings to light a number of individuals who otherwise might have remained in obscurity. The man who achieved a veritable apotheosis in this case was Professor Ephraim Cross, without whose presence the machinery of the Knickerbocker case might never have been set in motion and kept in motion. He acted as a whip throughout and issued one of the more remarkable documents in the case, which is saying a good deal.

In a sense, Cross's whole previous experience was a preparation for his current role. According to the Board's report, during the sixteen years he worked as a teacher in the city's high schools, he made numerous complaints, "some threatening grave

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

charges." Soon after he came to City College in 1931 as an instructor, he was at odds with Knickerbocker's predecessor in office, Professor Felix Weill (who was Jewish), charging "tyranny," "dictatorship," and "oppression." During this period he worked actively for increased democracy in school affairs, especially for a greater voice by the faculty in running itself. He wrote eloquent, passionate letters to the newspapers on the subject. (The obvious irony, of course, is that Cross is largely protesting today against a democratically-elected chairman and a democratically-elected appointments committee, neither of which recommended him for promotion.) His early activities after Knickerbocker became chairman consisted of frequent attempts to get a faculty investigation of the Romance Languages Department. According to the Board, he offered no specific grounds for holding such an investigation. When the acting president, Nelson P. Mead, turned down his requests for an inquiry, Cross began gathering, from men who had had contact with Knickerbocker, affidavits to prove Knickerbocker's anti-Semitism, which he went around showing secretly. He soon formed a junta with other disaffected members of the department, men like Bach-y-Rita, for instance, who felt that his promotion was long overdue, and Elliot Pollinger, who once opposed Knickerbocker in a departmental election, coming within one vote of himself being chairman, and who had since not been promoted although recommended by Knickerbocker.

Currently, Cross is distributing, often in person in the College's lunchrooms and recreation centers, a small booklet aping the Board's report. The booklet is supposed to have been prepared by Otto Müller and Cross, but it bears the heavy mark of Cross's individual polemical style. It is in many ways an intriguing document. The booklet spends much time in making meticulous corrections in the Board's spelling of names and in its references to professorial titles. The president is regularly referred to, in asides, as a man who spends his vacations at a "restricted" resort. But the most interesting parts of the booklet are those describing the roles of the various Jews on the faculty who associated themselves with Knickerbocker.

One of the Jews who testified for Knickerbocker declared at one time, according to the booklet: "Every Christian is anti-Semitic. All you are doing is uncovering one more anti-Semite. . . . I am a Jew and intensely Jewish and I find anti-Semitism in every Christian. . . . I take it for granted." Another man, now an important administrator in the College, who also testified for Knickerbocker, was reported to have said to Pollinger after what looked like a particularly flagrant exhibition by Knickerbocker of favoritism toward non-Jews: "Elliot, this is a Christian world. From now on I support Knickerbocker." A Jew, an associate of Knickerbocker's in the Romance Languages Department, testified, according to Cross's booklet, both that he never "felt that there was any feeling towards me or any Jews in the department because they were Jews" and that he believed Müller was anti-Semitic. According to Cross, this man also had frequently remarked to him that "all Christians are anti-Semites."

It is hard to say exactly what Cross and Müller had in mind when they published this material. If they were trying to discredit the testimony of these men, they were obviously undermining their own charges even more. Not only were these allegedly anti-Gentile Jews able to work in harmony with Knickerbocker, but they were even favored by him, according to the booklet. It almost seems as if the booklet were addressing itself directly to Knickerbocker and taunting him, "See what kind of people your supporters are, see what they really think of you."

The general situation of other Jews on the faculty was and still is, of course, a tricky one. Few sympathize with Cross, but it is widely assumed that Knickerbocker is not exactly a good friend of the Jews, even if nothing could specifically be proved against him. It has been said that Cross's leadership

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of the complainants alienated a good number of faculty members from supporting the movement against Knickerbocker. One prominent Jewish professor, in another department, who had been a colleague of Knickerbocker's for many years and had the usual colleague's acquaintance with him, was heard to remark publicly and loudly to Knickerbocker: "Knickerbocker, you old fool, why don't you retire and end the whole mess?" Most faculty members have remained quiet, agreeing generally with the strategy of the administration in handling the situation, if not with every tactic. Morton Gottschall, dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Science, is obviously in the most exposed position. Cross has implied that he is a renegade because he has stood fast with the administration, and that he has yielded to pressure from his superiors in opposition to his natural feelings. At the same time, it has been rumored that Gottschall has been instrumental in keeping from further advancement certain men with much seniority who are noted for their anti-Jewish remarks.

THE Knickerbocker case is still not settled and like all such things probably never will be. For the record, the State Commissioner of Education still remains to be heard from. No matter what his decision, there is sure to be further litigation and discussion and agitation. Some day, the official juggling of the case will have to come to an end, but the undercurrents that have been stirred into motion will probably remain strong for a long time after, perhaps never to subside. They have already made themselves felt in the normal course of the College's affairs. There are rumors that a number of men, some prominent, some unimportant, are planning to leave the College; one man of some importance has already done so. Some feel, the story goes, that the College has lost prestige because of the inept, bumbling way the Knickerbocker case was handled and because of the College's policy of not encouraging distinction in any field. A perverse fear of anti-Gentilism is making its wispy way through the offices. After a recent departmental election for chairman in which the man who was backed by most of the Jews in the department was elected (he himself happens not to be Jewish), supporters of the defeated candidate expressed a serious worry that "their days were numbered" and advised non-Jewish supporters of the new chairman that they had committed suicide in the College.

On the other hand, two Jewish men who have not been re-hired for the next academic year have been loudly and publicly declaring that, after all, no other attitude could be expected toward "Jewish progressives" from an administration which shields Knickerbocker and Davis. They have received support and encouragement from quite a few organizations, ranging from the Civil Rights Congress (on the Attorney General's "subversive" list) to the American Jewish Congress. Their protests have already forced the department of one of them to issue a circumspect statement to the effect that he was not being reappointed because of his inability to work harmoniously with his colleagues and his insistence on subordinating his work to outside politics. Generally, no reason is announced when a man is not reappointed, lest his future career be harmed; the wisdom of this principle is unassailable. The City College Alumni Association and the Board of Higher Education have just issued statements, following investigations, declaring that they "deplore" and "condemn" the raising of the false issue of anti-Semitic bias as the reason for not appointing these two men with tenure.

Perhaps the most dangerous result of the Knickerbocker case is the suggestion that has been advanced in some quarters that enough Jews be hired to bring their quota on the College faculty up to some such standard as, for instance, the percentage of Jews in the city. (Cross himself has been claiming credit for the sudden upsurge in the number of Jews who have been hired since the case started, at the same time declaring that the administration is only "covering up" its anti-Semitism by this maneuver. The increase may simply be due to the fact that more

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Jews than ever are around to be hired, the GI bill having made advanced study possible for many who otherwise couldn't have afforded it.) Why the criterion shouldn't be either the percentage of Jews in the College (which would raise the quota to eighty per cent) or the percentage in the country at large (which would get rid of all but a handful), it is impossible to say, since either extreme can be argued with equal cogency once the premise of the need of a quota is accepted. Obviously, hiring Jews on the ground of their Jewishness can as little be condoned as firing them or not hiring them for the same reason.

BEFORE the war, the Knickerbocker case, or any controversy involving anti-Semitism at the College, could never have achieved such virulence. (Knickerbocker himself has spent almost half a century at the College.) Then, students shrugged off open anti-Semitic remarks as coming from fools. The professor who used to define a "sheenie" was never caught up on his use of the term until just recently. (So solid was his reputation in the College as a good and noble soul, a reputation achieved among a predominantly Jewish student body and alumni group, that publication of the event was quashed by the students themselves.) Undergraduates with ambitions for university careers learned not to be sanguine about the possibility of appointments to the College in certain departments. (It should be remarked that two of the largest departments in the College, history and English, have not exercised a *numerus clausus* in the appointment of Jews.) Jewish students accepted the existence of anti-Semitism as another of the dismal appurtenances of the College that had to be contended with, like the dirty cellar lunchroom and the filthy washrooms. It is only today, against the background of the newsreels of Buchenwald, that many have come to feel that anti-Semitism is something one must automatically "crush" whenever the opportunity offers, without the exercise of the usual precautions of logic and good sense.

Unfortunately, the taking of sides in the Knickerbocker case has been for many persons, students and non-students, too easy, too merely emotional a matter. The vigorous protest that had to be made against anti-Semitism, especially after Hitler, a protest which for many had somehow never adequately been made, was directed against the person of Knickerbocker, and Knickerbocker —so it would seem—became a symbolic victim who had to be "destroyed." More than one observer has remarked on the irony of the Jews themselves falling into the practice of ritual "scapegoating," of which they have so often been the victim.

AS ONE thoughtful Jewish community leader put it: "The more one looks at such crusades as the Knickerbocker case, the more one is impressed with their lack of realistic relation to any presumed objective, whether it be to right some specific wrong against Jews or to create a favorable public climate for the elimination, on a broad front, of anti-Jewish prejudice or discriminatory practices. In the hue and cry of the play 'war,' truth and justice get lost early in the no-man's-ground between the two loyalist 'armies.' To be sure, such 'cases' provide a thrilling drama in which participants and spectators can purge themselves of pent-up conflicting emotions. But unhappily these 'militant' binges may prove an exceedingly expensive form of self-indulgence. There are boomerang effects. Mob spirit undermines academic and civic safeguards and liberties; individuals can be hurt, and academic institutions likewise, by irresponsible accusations; liberal interests and causes can be exploited by self-seeking leftwing and Jewish chauvinist organizations; the repute and good faith of all organizations devoted to combating prejudice may be seriously undermined; and the necessary long-range struggle against anti-Semitism can find itself diverted into wasteful and unprofitable channels."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE KEY TO KAFKA

What is His True Significance?

HERMANN L. GOLDSCHMIDT

THE name of Franz Kafka, scarcely known twenty-five years ago when he died with his most important works still unpublished, today echoes round the world. The forced exile of the German Jews, hardly ten years after Kafka's death, carried his reputation to the four corners of the earth; and humanity in its period of uprooting during and after the Second World War has increasingly discovered its dilemmas and its fate expressed in his unique works.

Withal, it has still not been settled in which realm his true significance lies. The character and direction of his genius has been endlessly debated, and every year sees new interpretations of his works. Let us look at some of these interpretations, and at the evidence to be found in Kafka's life and work itself.

FRANZ KAFKA was born in Prague on July 3, 1883. He chose to study law, in which he felt no great interest, because he thought it would distract him least from his "one desire and one calling, which is literature." At twenty-five he became an officer of the Workman's Accident Insurance Institute of Prague; nine years later, upon his suddenly falling ill with tuberculosis, he was given a leave of absence and shortly thereafter was retired. He died of tuberculosis at the age of forty-one, on June 3, 1924.

Kafka's family was ruled by his father, who had risen to the status of a wholesale dealer in fancy goods. Hermann Kafka kept his home and his business—a store selling to retailers—as close together as possible, claiming his wife, who was a woman of deep feeling, wholly for himself. Franz, too—the only son, after the death in infancy of two brothers—was called on to help out in the business. It was not until six years after his birth that the first of his three sisters was born.

So strong was the father's influence, particularly on the son, that Kafka had not only to fight continually for his own existence, but even wanted his father to give him approval for it. The consequence was that he remained dependent on his father to the end, and in a state of painful subjection to him. Not until the last year of his life did Kafka venture to move from Prague to Berlin, and then it was only to be brought back home mortally ill in the spring. He died before his parents, and it is a symbol of his ultimate failure to escape from them that even in death he shares his grave with them.

For Kafka the only real proof of independence would have been to found a family of his own. In trying to do this he made himself a writer first of all, but then came to grief because of his failure to accomplish his original aim. In August 1912 he met his future fiancée. Hard upon this he wrote the story

---

THOUGH Franz Kafka is now recognized as one of the greatest writers of our century, enthusiasm for his work is still confined to relatively restricted circles. In some ways Kafka is the clearest of modern writers, and yet in the mind of the general reading public he is classed among the "difficult" writers who can be read only by the specialist. One explanation for this paradox may lie in the fact that the literal surface of Kafka's writing has been made the base for a mountain of confusing and contradictory interpretations. HERMANN L. GOLDSCHMIDT here attempts to give us a key to Kafka calculated not so much to supplant the other interpretations as to provide a common underpinning for them all. Mr. Goldschmidt, born in Berlin in 1914, lives at present in Switzerland, where he is president of Omanut, an organization for the encouragement and dissemination of Jewish art. This article grew out of a speech delivered in Zurich on the twenty-fifth anniversary of Kafka's death. The article is translated from the German by Martin Greenberg.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"The Judgment" in a single night, and followed it within a month with "The Stoker" and "The Metamorphosis." But within five years—a last evasion of that marriage which he still continued to desire so passionately—he had contracted his deadly illness, which he penetratingly greeted with these words: "My head got together with my lungs behind my back."

It was not until the last year of his life that Kafka was again able to hope that he might marry. His illness, however, doomed this to remain only a hope, and he did not even have the partial comfort of a formal engagement: the pious father of his girl went to the Gerer Rabbi with Kafka's suit, and the latter, who never vouchsafed explanation, simply said "No."

KAFKA'S work can be divided into three parts: prose pieces and short stories, novels, and aphorisms. He wrote all through his life; at twenty, already, he had told Oskar Pollak, a friend of his youth: "I'll make up a packet of everything I've written so far. . . . There will be nothing missing from it but some juvenilia (you see, misfortune's been squatting on my back from the beginning). . . ." But there is a break between his lifelong fictional efforts and the aphorisms (today considered by Max Brod as Kafka's greatest achievement), which he first began to write after the beginning of his illness and the breaking-off of his engagement; and there is a second break between his short prose pieces, which he himself published, and his novels, which he not only did not publish, but even wanted destroyed after his death.

Kafka left behind a written request to his friend Max Brod that he destroy all his posthumous papers, although on once alluding to this request, he had already heard Brod's answer: that he would not do it. Thus it was left to posterity to decide between Kafka's last will and the hope he no doubt secretly cherished that his work would not be discarded but preserved: that he himself had not only been called, but had also been chosen.

IF WE begin, in our attempt to understand Kafka's work, with its most immediate and striking features, it will be apparent at once, I think, that nature had no effect on him at all, whether as sea, mountains, trees, meadows, flowers, or even as urban landscape. The few descriptions contained in his first novel, *Amerika*, give us only a distant view of things: of the ocean and a harbor seen from a ship's cabin; of mountains seen from a train; of a street seen from a balcony. Interiors are described more often, but never directly as a part of nature, as in naturalistic drama. And yet Kafka is not only a close observer of the actual world, he also knows how to inspire the reader with a conviction, such as can only arise from accurate observation, of its obduracy and nearness. Thus, in *Amerika*, he describes the workings of the elevators in a large hotel with an immediacy impossible to any writer indifferent to "things."

But nature in the sense of landscape is lacking—even though the reader never finds Kafka's world incomplete for want of it. And there is also a lack of anything feminine for its own sake. Kafka's female figures are sometimes the mothers, sometimes the sweethearts of his heroes, but they are seen only through the eyes of the man—as ocean and harbor are seen from a captain's cabin—the object of his desire or the source of his temptation. Yet Kafka's work is not one-sidedly masculine, but embraces the whole world of man and woman; though the protagonist is always a man, his existence is permanently bound up with women.

Moreover, this world is exceptionally human in so far as nature is never experienced as such, but only as expressing the fate of the human spirit, whose every movement brings it into collision with nature. This has what at first glance seems the paradoxical result that animals, too, have a place in Kafka's world: there is no boundary separating the animal from the spiritual—but, contrariwise, the animal (in "A Report to an Academy") whom human beings have taught to speak nevertheless cannot become a human being. So that on the one hand apes, jackals, dogs, mice, moles serve as the protagonists of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Kafka's stories, but on the other hand in so doing they only recall the human being to his own world: out of the world which he falls short of as an animal, into the world which he is called upon to confront as a human being.

A brief description of the "plots" of some of Kafka's stories would not be amiss. "The Metamorphosis": a young salesman, the sole support of his parents and sister, wakes one morning to find himself transformed into an insect; though he is still human, his animal shape shuts him out from life. "An Imperial Message": the dying Emperor dispatches a personal message to one of his individual subjects, which, however, never reaches him because the distance between them is too great, and moreover it changes into a dead man's message on the way. "A Hunger Artist": though famous, he dares not fast too long, lest his public tire of him; when he goes out of fashion he is able to break all records, but no one now pays any attention to him. "Blumfeld, an Elderly Bachelor": ossifying in his daily habits, he suddenly finds two small, white, blue-striped balls bouncing up and down around him, which, do what he may, he cannot get rid of. "Investigations of a Dog," thought to be Kafka's last story: the dog's investigations seek to explain such mysteries as the fact that food descends to the dogs from above; the story presupposes that dogs do not know of the existence of human beings.

Then there are the three great novels. *Amerika:* a sixteen-year-old boy who "had been a student in a European intermediate school"—so reads the only qualification he can prove himself to possess—lands in America, where his childlike innocence causes him to make a fiasco of everything he undertakes. *The Trial:* a bank clerk is told that he is under arrest; the fact of his arrest, as well as the existence of the authorities by whom it is decreed, is hardly visible in the ordinary life he immediately resumes, but it forces him to attempt to prove his innocence and thereby involves him more and more deeply with the authorities; on the eve of his thirty-first birthday he is executed. *The Castle:* a stranger seeks permission to live in a village that is under the rule of a castle, but is never able to reach the castle, which alone has the right to grant him such permission; in persisting in his attempts to reach it, he gradually perishes.

These few sentences indicate neither the wealth of incident nor the depth of meaning contained in these novels, but do reveal the genre they belong to: they are *Entwicklungsromane* (novels of growth), like *Parzival, Simplicius Simplicissimus, Wilhelm Meister, Hyperion, Jakobs Wanderungen, Der Grüne Heinrich, Der Nachsommer, Der Zauberberg,* with their old, familiar question: how does a boy become a man? How can a human being become a human being in the world? How does he remain one? However alien Kafka may at first glance seem to be (though he is no more alien than this world we once thought ourselves at home in, but which we have all been turned out of now, to wander up and down in) yet he belongs to the spiritual history of the West; he continues our European yesterday into our today—and perhaps into our tomorrow.

WE HAVE now to consider the various interpretations so far made of Kafka's work—each right enough in its own way, or at least not wrong, but missing the essential point—by way of preliminary to what I wish to offer as the correct interpretation, which is no "interpretation" at all.

First of all there is the psychoanalytic interpretation, which seeks to understand Kafka in terms of the psychic complications that became his fate. Kafka is an unsurpassably pure case of the Oedipus complex; he could never resolve the struggle with his father for his mother, and could never pass beyond the maternal attachment to the independence of conjugal love. This personal situation is depicted in most of his short stories and in all the novels in scarcely veiled terms. But what elsewhere can illuminate so much, bringing to light what has lain unconscious and repressed, has little to tell us here. For if we come to Kafka armed with our knowledge that he suffered from an Oedipus complex,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

he himself replies: "Anyone who has no more to say than psychoanalysis shouldn't mix in. [I grant that psychoanalysis is] at least as *existent* as the present generation. [But] Judaism has from the beginning always brought forth its joys and sorrows almost simultaneously with their appropriate Rashi commentary. . . . Psychology is the reading of mirror writing . . . fruitful enough as far as its conclusions are concerned, which invariably tally, but nothing has really happened."

On the night of September 22-23, 1912, aroused by his meeting with his future fiancée, Kafka wrote "The Judgment" at one sitting. A young merchant announces to his father that he has told a friend of his engagement (to a girl whose initials are the same as those of Kafka's fiancée), whereupon his father sentences him to death by drowning. The young man immediately carries out the sentence upon himself. After having written this, Kafka noted in his diary what came to his mind while writing the story—that he would now have something for Brod's *Arkadia,* that he had been thinking of certain of Wassermann's works, of Werfel, and, he goes on, "thoughts about Freud, of course." And thus, again, the Freudian interpretation is knocked out of our hands: where we find Freudianism consciously built into the very foundation of a work, it loses its explanatory value.

THERE is the medical interpretation, ingenious but of no great weight, which traces Kafka's "trial"—and *The Trial* could be the title not only of this novel, but also of many of his short stories—back to his tubercular "trial," wherein, too, "K." is suddenly "arrested," condemned to death, and in spite of all the "lawyers" he consults, of all his efforts to be "acquitted," is executed. *The Trial* itself, or such a story as "The Burrow," composed during the last winter of Kafka's life and describing an animal's incessant efforts to safeguard itself against an enemy called "the beast" (at the time Kafka was writing the story he used to call his racking cough "the beast"), can, it is true, be translated back into the language of his illness, but to do so is to lose what is predominant, the literal and particular story.

A more important interpretation is the religious one, which rests above all on the aphorisms. This interpretation, based on the concept of the quest for God, has it that Kafka expresses, as almost no one else has done, the modern world's God-forsakenness, and yet that he never doubts what he called the "Indestructible." Without disregarding the serious justifications for the prevailing irreligion, he knew that he stood before an ultimate to which he was answerable, and which might be unattainable and incomprehensible yet never ceases to exist. Not even in so terrible an image as the following (one among many) does it cease to exist: "The animal wrests the whip from its master and whips itself so as to become master, and does not know that all this is only a fantasy caused by a new knot in the master's whiplash."

Kafka's work can readily be interpreted as evidence of such a sorely tried but unshakable faith. "The Imperial Message" is a parable of the word of God; *The Trial,* of the tribunal that sits in judgment upon man, who loudly protests his innocence but still does not seek God; *The Castle,* on the contrary, of man's quest for the lost final meaning of his life. It is true that Kafka wished to lead a life issuing from and aspiring back to the divine, that he considered only such a life worth living, and that, lastly, he has left behind sayings that put him among the God-seekers. But it is not true that his religious vocation—in which, moreover, his father-fixation denied him the possibility of any ultimate experience—ruled supreme in his life. The aphorisms that he began to write just after the onset of his illness mark out a new path for him. Given a longer life, he might have been able to pursue it and his existence might have attained perhaps to a new, predominantly religious stage. This, however, he was not able to do. Something else he *was* able to do, however inadequate it may have always seemed in his own eyes—he was able to write stories.

What interpretation is given of these stories by Existentialism and Surrealism, those move-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ments whose paths crossed Kafka's when they grew into international fashions (which perhaps accounts for the fact that his reputation has at the moment something questionable about it)? Like Existentialism, Kafka pushes to extremes, into "extreme situations." Something as ordinary as a bachelor's life (and here he is surrealistic as well) he will suddenly call into question by introducing into it an element as flagrantly out of the ordinary as two celluloid balls bouncing up and down by themselves. That is, in a world emptied of meaning, he raises anew the question of meaning. The question, too, is Existentialist in that it never receives an answer; it no longer seems possible to escape absurdity, but only to preserve in it—by one's consciousness of it—a last remnant of spiritual life. Kafka, however, differs from Existentialism and Surrealism in a decisive respect: for him they are not ends in themselves; their world, the world of contemporary despair, is his, for out of it he shapes his work, but Kafka moves us even when we are indifferent to the ideological background, as on the other hand he moves us more than ideologically even when this background means something to us.

A LAST preliminary word ought to be said about Kafka's Judaism, which he touches on with uncommon frequency in his letters and diaries but nowhere mentions in his imaginative writings—writings whose "Jewish" quality is pervasive, but the "Jewish" interpretation of which likewise falls short.

In the "Letter to My Father," which Kafka wrote in November 1919—it is more than a hundred pages long but in the end was never delivered to its addressee—he describes three stages in the evolution of his Judaism. As a child he reproached himself for not fasting enough or going to temple. As a young man these reproaches ceased, for the paternal Judaism seemed to him much too empty. But in the end he came to understand better that for his father, who had passed a thoroughly Jewish childhood in the countryside, this Judaism could survive even in its pitiful Prague remnants, whereas it could never suffice for his son, even though it was the only Judaism he ever knew. So he had to find his own way to it; but his father necessarily viewed his son's efforts to find an independent way to Judaism as "disgusting"—painful reminders of the weakness of his own Judaism and of the inadequate Jewish education he had given his son.

Of what did Kafka's own efforts consist? Of everything possible to a liberal-minded son of the middle class: from the study of Jewish literature to attendance at Jewish functions, contributions to Jewish periodicals, the organizing of various Jewish functions on his own—Kafka arranged a recital for a Yiddish actor and himself gave the introductory talk, and he got his nephews and nieces to attend a Jewish school that Max Brod conducted in Prague—to taking part in the Zionist movement. Even in his last winter Kafka went to a lecture on the Talmud at the Berlin Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums. More than a few of his notebook pages are covered with Hebrew exercises, interspersed among his own writings, and he entertained plans for emigrating to Palestine.

More important, however, more "Jewish" than these external preoccupations, is the way his work, never explicitly concerning itself with Judaism, expresses it immediately. Kafka always shows himself most Jewish where he is most himself, in his fiction; his people are not "merely" Jews, but only a Jew could have created them.

The biggest obstacle to the modern artist—the absence of a common social basis—is surmounted in Kafka: without forcing reality into realistic, or naturalistic, or surrealistic forms, or dressing it in a dazzling expressionist or symbolist disguise—which, however, does not exclude his making use of these means at times—Kafka is always on solid ground. A mysterious tranquillity reigns even over his most dreadful scenes: nothingness—or, in the language of Existentialism, annihilating nothingness—has the effect less of annihilation than of a testing of ultimate "indestructibility." Yet how can a contemporary man take his stand on the void, as

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Kafka the writer was obliged to do at this historical juncture, and still show so few signs of agitation? Here his Judaism was of crucial help to him: for, though the Jewish orientation is this-worldly in everything, it has been our destiny as Jews to exist as a people in contradiction to every natural tie, and never to be wedded to anything on earth to such an extent as to feel ourselves threatened when it totters.

I should like to avoid reducing Kafka's Judaism to a limited formula—which would also reduce Judaism to a formula; for the precise sense in which Kafka, and we who continue to share his epoch, are Jews, will be determined only by our future history, when we have lived it to its end. But even so, it must be conceded that not a great deal is to be got from a special Jewish interpretation of Kafka. Not individual details—such as the family of the Castle messenger Barnabas, so easily seen as "Jewish"—but his whole work breathes a Jewish air. At the same time, however, he is also German in certain particulars: Faustian and Nordic in *The Castle*, in "In the Penal Colony" downright Prussian, and German again as a writer of *Entwicklungsromane*.

Like the psychoanalytical interpretation, like the interpretation that refers everything back to his tuberculosis, like the Existentialist and Surrealist interpretations, the Jewish interpretation too is useful only as it points the way to a comprehensive conception—that of Kafka as a creative writer—which, while it validates all special interpretations, also allows Kafka more significance than it is possible to find in any one interpretation. One can reflect, not without irony, that it was not until the twilight of the German-Jewish association, exactly one hundred years after the appearance of Moses Mendelssohn's pioneering *Jerusalem* in 1783, that an authentic Jewish creative literary artist was born—one who created something that neither existed before him nor was derived from what was given by his time, but, once it was there, seemed entirely right and self-evident, a thing not artificially forced but naturally ripened.

From his early youth, Kafka was resolved to be a writer, exclusively and entirely a writer. When he went to Rudolf Steiner for advice about the conflicting claims of his writing, his job, and the leanings he then had toward theosophy, he said: "My happiness, my talents, and every possibility I have of being of some use in the world have always been in the literary field." In the draft of a letter to his fiancée's father he writes: "I find my job unbearable because it conflicts with my one desire and my one calling, which is literature. Since I exist for nothing but literature, and can and wish to exist for nothing else, my job can never have any attraction for me, even though it may cause me to go completely to pieces. . . . Everything that isn't literature bores me, and I hate it, for it distracts me. . . ."

"Literature," Kafka says, not "art" (*Dichtung*), purely out of reverence for what to him was most precious—which was not "literature" but, precisely, "art." Hence his aversion to publishing, out of a timid fear of not having satisfied the high demands of the art of writing; hence above all his turning down of every opportunity to make a profession of his writing, to earn his living by it. After his first appearance in print with *Meditation*, which Max Brod had arranged to have published, Kafka remarks in his diary: "In any event, now, after the publication of the book, I shall have to keep away from magazines and reviews even more than before, if I don't want to be satisfied with just sticking my fingertips into the truth." And in the letter he had drafted to his fiancée's father: "You could ask me why I don't throw up the job and . . . try to support myself by literary work. To which I can only make the miserable reply that I . . . would rather die of it. . . ."

Two more examples, the first from an early period: "At night and in the morning [before and after his daily stint at the office] the sense in me of my creative abilities is immense. I feel myself unbend to the bottom of my being and can draw out of myself anything I wish." And the following from the period of the writing of *The Castle*: "In the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

meantime I have . . . begun to write, and this writing, in the awfullest way for everyone around me, is the most important thing on earth to me, something like his delusion to a madman, or being pregnant to a woman. . . . And for this reason I hug my writing to me in nervous dread of any disturbance, and not only my writing but also the solitude that goes with it."

This is why Max Brod's contribution to a volume of essays called *Jews in German Literature*, edited by Gustav Krojanker and published in 1922 (while Kafka was still alive), the first essay to be devoted to Kafka, had as its title, "Franz Kafka the Writer." And why another friend of Kafka's, Felix Weltsch, in an essay on "Religious Humor in Franz Kafka," published in 1948, summed up his judgment as follows: "Kafka was a writer, and only that. He was no thinker in the systematic sense, nor on the other hand was he a religious man in the positive sense; all that he was, he was as a writer. 'Writing' was his passion, and in literary creation lay every possibility of happiness for him."

But if Kafka was a writer of stories, then it is as art that we must consider his work. Art is an autonomous possibility of our life, neither derived from something stronger, nor referable to something more important. This should not be misunderstood to mean "art for art's sake"—art and artists are part of a comprehensive whole and they are not the center of that whole; even at its most distinctive, art has a relation to the rest of the world. Yet, in comparison with everything else, it is somehow primary, subject only to its own standards. We do not ask whether a writer's description of a house satisfies architectural principles, whether his animals are zoologically correct, whether the conversations he writes are philosophically adequate. All we ask is this: are they convincing as art?

And so we may now ask if what Kafka wrote, with the intention of making it art, succeeded as that. And we ask whether this conception of Kafka's work does justice to its total effect on us.

When we read Kafka as we would read a poem, or listen to music, or look at a painting, we come upon something—and doubtless this is part of the so-called "beauty" of art—that we darkly divine to be ourselves—that we know abstractly to be ourselves—that we fear uneasily, but also hope secretly, is ourselves—because what we are, through the agency of words, here confronts us as form. We begin, not so much to know something *about* ourselves, as to know ourselves *directly*. For this reason Kafka's writings fail to reassure us the way an authoritative, apparently definitive answer to a question does; yet on the other hand they beget in us a peculiar tranquillity and in a lofty sense they satisfy us, for we feel ourselves to have been expressed, regardless of whether or not we also understand abstractly and in its details what is expressed.

Out of words Kafka made forms; his achievement, a writer's achievement, is less the discovering of these forms than the finding of appropriate words for them. His forms are not discoveries, but poeticizations of all that beset him—and all that besets us. The world that stares us in the face at any time, that in our consciousness we take to be the real world, is not after all the world in which we actually live. While men may live in tidy rooms, between solid walls, in orderly surroundings, things are not always tidy or orderly with them. Between their technical mastery of the world and their spiritual condition yawns a chasm. Because they walk upright on two legs, it does not follow that they have in them that uprightness which seems to be reflected in their carriage. Only partly at home in ourselves and in our surroundings, we always need, among other things, the help of the artist: to teach us that though we seem to be we are not—and to comfort us, when we have come to know the need for it, with the knowledge that we are.

Kafka is not a great creative writer—or even a writer at all—because the material of his art is the material out of which the present-day world is composed: bureaucracy, homelessness, loneliness, atavistic bestiality,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

inaccessible, apparently arbitrary powers on whose decision everything depends. He is a creator because he is able to express, with and through this material, what, unexpressed, besets us all today. This is not to deny the importance of his clear-sighted anticipation of our fragmented and wretched age as a whole, as well as his grasp of it in its details. After having read Kafka, even if we have not exactly understood what is meant—even if, horrified, indignant, revolted, we put him aside—how often will it happen that in certain situations we suddenly say to ourselves: why, this is perfect Kafka! This is just how he described it!

But we can see his distinctive accomplishment more clearly if we compare the effect he makes on us with that made by other writers who in spite of their lasting significance belong to our past—and with the effect made by contemporary authors who in spite of their nearness to us in time, whence their significance derives, are of no final significance. Shakespeare may be said still to express everything that besets us—but in spite of our absorption in his work, in spite of its redemptive, elevating, inspiring effect, we are still detached from his magnificent art, separated from it by a remove of three hundred years. Profoundly moved by it as we are, it only makes us long the more for just such a great art of our own time.

On the other hand, there are any number of present-day writers whose works mirror the experiences, suffering, hopes, fears, and dreams of modern times; but this direct expression of the present without any temporal remove does not satisfy the requirements of art. I dare say descriptions of concentration camps, devastated cities, refugees, and atom-bomb experiments are closer to us—and in many ways more important, too—than all the battles, intrigues, and monologues in Shakespeare. Nevertheless it is still Shakespeare we need, rather than our on-the-spot contemporary reporters; for in comparison with the ordinary writer, the creative writer is always our better guide along the way to ourselves.

The best guide, however—better than the writer who is close to us merely by virtue of his contemporaneity, and better than the poet of the eternally human of another age—the best guide (and here we come back to Kafka) is the contemporary creator. But such an artist—it is the large price we must pay for him—also presents us with a task. Like every age, ours must labor for its art; we have first to earn our poet. Here it is neither a question simply of comprehending a new content or new forms that express a familiar content, nor of comprehending an art that for generations already has been discussed, investigated, and recognized by cultivated minds—it is a question, on the one hand, of new *art,* and, on the other, of the new in *our* art.

If Kafka is a true creator—that rare thing, a creative artist of one's own time—we have to consider not only his achievement, but what we must do to apprehend this achievement. How shall we do justice to this writer? The right way—every reader must find it for himself—seems to me to lie between a too literal regard for the content and an exclusively symbolical interpretation. Let me illustrate this by three quotations—three passages of no very great importance, so that there will be no mistaking them for anything more than examples.

K., the hero of *The Castle,* reaches the village deep in snow, looks for quarters for the night, and has to make his bed next to the stove in the inn. He is suddenly awakened by a young man who asks him if he has permission to spend the night in the village. Since K. claims to have come at the bidding of the Castle, the young man avails himself of what today is the readiest means for settling the matter: he calls up the Castle on the telephone. But this instrumentality—which in a purely technical sense overcomes every obstacle—embraces all the possibilities of complication that have since the beginning of history accompanied every human action. What happens after this is what usually happens when we have recourse to the telephone: as soon as the receiver is hung up, we are, it is true, the wiser for an answer,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

but the real answer, the answer that we need, is as far away as ever.

Here Kafka shows himself to be the poet of a telephone-using humanity. He is the first in whom the telephone is not simply an indifferent external object, but an essential part of our earthly lot, deeply involved in our human existence. On the other hand, he also shows himself to be a writer of great symbolical force; in the problematical character of our telephone conversations he is able to symbolize directly all our "calls" to the Eternal. But in the end what seems to me decisive is neither the fact of someone's telephoning, nor the symbolical use to which this is put; what is decisive is that we are moved. "That's how it is," we suddenly realize, even if we cannot formulate more precisely what this "that" refers to.

Another example from *The Castle*. K. gets his way and is allowed to stay in the courtyard of the inn; from this vantage point he will be able to watch the official charged with his case as he departs for the Castle, and may even be able to speak to him. But actually he doesn't have his way at all: the official's sled, which had been ready to leave, is unhitched; the man will never leave while K. remains in the courtyard. "Then it seemed to K. as if at last those people had broken off all relations with him, and as if now in reality he were freer than he had ever been, and at liberty to wait here in this place usually forbidden to him as long as he desired, and had won a freedom such as hardly anybody else had ever succeeded in winning, and as if nobody could dare to touch him or drive him away, or even speak to him; but —this conviction was at least equally strong— as if at the same time there was nothing more senseless, nothing more hopeless, than this freedom, this waiting, this inviolability."

What have we here? Not a "philosophy of freedom"—under philosophical scrutiny this passage slips all too easily into the banal. What we have here, in association with the preceding description of the snow-covered courtyard, is a mood, a general feeling, a psychical and spiritual state realized in language—in short, a masterful instance of poetic art. Not as philosophy are we to "understand" it, but as art: by immersing ourselves in it, by losing ourselves in it, by giving ourselves up to it as unreflectingly and as sympathetically as we can. When we are able to do this, we shall also be able to "understand" the passage that follows shortly, which is attended by no real or apparent explanation to which the "understanding" can address itself.

The last book Kafka himself had published, *A Hunger Artist,* begins with a four-page story entitled "First Sorrow." In it a trapeze artist, who on railway journeys passes his time up on the luggage rack, dreaming, suddenly informs his manager that in the future he will have to have not one, but two trapezes, "two trapezes opposite each other." In his longing for the second trapeze, the artist bursts into tears; the manager hastily promises him the second trapeze and thus reassures him. The manager himself, however, the story concludes, "was far from reassured, with deep uneasiness he kept glancing secretly at the trapeze artist over the top of his book. Once such ideas began to torment him, would they ever quite leave him alone? Would they not rather increase in urgency? Would they not threaten his very existence? And indeed the manager believed he could see, during the apparently peaceful sleep that had succeeded the fit of tears, the first furrows of care engraving themselves upon the trapeze artist's smooth, childlike forehead."

What do these affecting sentences express? The fate of the artist? Man's fate in general, symbolized in the fate of the artist? As they justify this, so they justify many other interpretations; what is most important, however, is that they are "beautiful"—beautiful as the great art of every age is beautiful, and by this token possessed of that particular beauty which our contemporary anguish requires for its expression.

IT IS right to extoll Kafka so unreservedly as artist and writer; yet his limitations are not to be passed over. But unlike what is ordinarily the case, with Kafka it is a ques-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tion not of the limitations of the man but of the limitations of what he was engaged in: the limitations of art. Kafka's limitations are the limitations of Kafka the *writer*—the ultimate insufficiency, bordering on the tragic, of art in general. As the aging Shakespeare was overwhelmed by the insufficiency of art (or Hölderlin after the same twelve years of literary creativity that were allotted Kafka), so Kafka did not escape a feeling of disillusionment and despair before the irreducible discrepancy between artistic creation and the created world, between the consummated real world and the never consummated world of artistic creation.

Nevertheless, in my opinion all that has been urged as Kafka's limitations, whether simply read into his work or actually there, is without ultimate importance. The horror, the hopelessness, the forsakenness, the forlornness, the equivocalness that he so much insists upon, the pitiless objectivity, the fragmentariness—all these are cultivated for their own sakes only where he is at his weakest. Elsewhere they are only means—the means to an art of our time. This fact alone, that these qualities serve to bring art into being, is enough to dispel the gloom they cast over Kafka's pages. If one looks past them to Kafka's humor, perhaps, or to his great calm, his triumphant clarity, his ascendancy, his humility, and not least to his indestructible faith, the indestructible faith of a Jew, the gloom is dispelled. Even when one fastens one's eyes only on the shadows of Kafka's art, one sees them in the framework of art, as part of a poetic creation—as part, that is, of an authentic triumph of man over the power of time.

It is not his limitations but his achievement that is if ultimate significance. The work of Franz Kafka has meaning for all men who aspire to lead a fruitful life in this age, when only too often we are inclined to despair. Even today it is possible to harvest the fruits that have always made life beautiful and worthwhile and endurable. That it was possible for a true creator to have existed in this century makes it certain that all the human possibilities are still open to us—if only we have the courage to take them seriously.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE SCHOOLING OF DAVID DUBINSKY

A Democratic Labor Leader in the Making

WACLAW SOLSKI

DAVID DUBINSKY was born David Dobnievski in Brest-Litovsk fifty-seven years ago. While he was a small child, his family moved to Lodz, where he went to a primary school and learned to read and write Polish, Russian, and Yiddish. His school days ended when he was thirteen.

His father owned a small bakery. It was in a semi-basement: one room with one small window and a large baking oven in the middle. Behind it was a narrow hall that served as a kitchen, and behind this was one bedroom used by David's father, stepmother, and older brother. David himself usually slept in the delivery wagon in the yard—but in winter his bed was in the kitchen. The bakers worked at night, putting the fresh bread and rolls to cool on a large board at the head of his bed. Lying there, David was able to pick up the secrets of the baker's trade—no simple matter—with unusual rapidity. At fourteen he became a master baker in his father's shop, earning twelve rubles a week—about six dollars. In 1907, six dollars went about as far as twenty-five do today.

I asked him whether he still remembered the address of his father's bakery. "Number 16 Vschodnia Street," he said. "Do you know where that was?" I do know. Vschodnia Street was a narrow and crowded thoroughfare, lined with three- and four-story houses; behind these residences of the rich stood back-tenements called "officines." The big houses had bathrooms; the tenants of the "officines" had to use outhouses. The population of the street was almost entirely Jewish.

POLISH literature has two novels devoted to the city of Lodz, both written at the turn of the century. One, by Zygmunt Bartkiewicz, is called *The Bad City;* the other, by Vladyslav Reymont, a Polish winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, is called *The Promised Land*—but the title is ironical. Both books are saturated with hatred of Lodz, Poland's most industrialized city. It is an extremely ugly town, and when David Dubinsky lived there it was a place of sharp contrasts between poverty and luxury, a place of booming and pitiless industrial capitalism.

Factories stood even on the main thoroughfares in the very heart of the city, right among the palaces of the Lodz millionaire factory owners, whose workers slaved twelve and fifteen hours a day and were kept from striking with the help of Cossacks. And cheek by jowl with these factories and the mansions they supported were the wretched

---

DAVID DUBINSKY, long-time president of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, has played a unique role in the American labor movement. In a sweatshop industry torn by labor strife, he built a great and disciplined union, and with the power of that union has helped to create an exemplary pattern of peaceful labor-management relations. His union, now one of the strongest in the United States, has been a pioneer in educational and welfare work among its members, and has come in recent years to play an important political role on the side of economic planning and civil rights. WACLAW SOLSKI here traces Mr. Dubinsky's rejection of totalitarianism, whether of the extreme Right or the extreme Left, to its source in the democratic revolutionary movement within which Mr. Dubinsky grew up in Lodz, Poland. Mr. Solski has had the benefit of lengthy conversations with Mr. Dubinsky in preparing this article, and had the extra good fortune (at least for present purposes) of being himself a native of Lodz. He has published nineteen books in Europe, and has an intimate acquaintance with the European democratic socialist movement of which Mr. Dubinsky was a part.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

slums where whole families lived in one room, and not seldom in cellars. Lodz was one of the first cities in Poland to have electric trolley cars—long before Warsaw—in order to carry its many workers to the factories; cheap transportation was considered a necessity. Sanitation, on the other hand, was regarded as a luxury; this second largest Polish city, with more than half a million inhabitants, had no sewage system. Dirty water—and not only water—flowed down the gutters of even the principal streets, taking on red, green, and azure-blue colors from the waste dyes poured directly into the gutters, in defiance of regulations, by the textile factories.

There was fierce competition on all levels of society. Too many poor peasants flowed into the city, attracted by its growing industries, and they formed a source of cheap labor that kept wages down. Too many poor Jews struggled to maintain themselves and their families by handicrafts and small businesses. Many had hole-in-the-wall stores stocked with a barrel of pickels, a few herrings, and a big copper siphon of soda water. The capital investment of these stores rarely exceeded five or ten rubles, yet the turnover had to be sufficient to support a whole family. On a somewhat higher economic level, conditions were hardly better. Small businesses, always short of cash, had to borrow at an outrageously high rate of interest. But regular promissory notes were not popular in Lodz, for they usually weren't paid. To make payment on loans sure, someone invented what was at that time called a "Lodzer" or an "iron" promissory note: the borrower had to *forge* the signature of an endorser on his note and the lender had to *know* that the signature was forged. Sometimes he even forced you to forge it in his presence. If you didn't redeem the note in time, you went to jail for forgery.

Yes, Lodz was a bad town to live in and make a living. But it was the home town of this writer himself and he listened with some emotion as David Dubinsky told him how, for recreation, he used to go to the velodrome on Cegielniana Street every week, a place the size of a tennis court where for a nickel you could ride around in clouds of dust for half an hour. Mr. Monde, the proprietor, supplied the bicycle and watched sharply to see that no one overstayed his time. Only boys of wealthy parents had their own bicycles.

The bakers of Lodz, like everybody else, worked from twelve to fifteen hours a day. In the Jewish shops, the Sabbath was observed, but work began again as soon as the sun set on Saturday night, and there was no holiday on Sunday. Boys usually went to work at the age of twelve or thirteen. David Dubinsky's education was rather exceptional: others couldn't boast of even that much.

DUBINSKY says that it was this education—his ability to write not only Yiddish, but also Polish and Russian—that was chiefly responsible for his election at fifteen to the secretaryship of his local of the bakers' union. Soon after, he helped organize a bakers' strike which affected his father's shop along with all the rest. The strikers won, but during the first night after victory most of the organizers of the strike were arrested. When the police came for young David at three in the morning, his father received them calmly. (He had not blamed his son for the strike, knowing only too well that the bakers' demands were just, and he had accepted them—although he also knew that he was in no real position to pay his workers higher wages.) He put an *arba kanfus* (a ceremonial garment worn at all times by Orthodox Jews) on David and gave him a small sum of money. At the police station to which David was taken, there were already more than sixty arrested strikers locked in one big cell. Most of them weren't docketed for a couple of days, so it was still possible to try to bribe one's way out; Dubinsky's father paid twenty-five rubles to the local police chief, and his son was released after ten days in jail on condition that he leave Lodz immediately.

"An uncle of mine, Moshe Wishnigrad, lived in Brest-Litovsk," Dubinsky says, "so

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I went there and stayed with him for three months, doing nothing. Then I got sick and tired of it and I returned to Lodz without permission of the police. It was then, a few days after my return to Lodz, that I experienced one of the greatest disappointments of my life.

"I don't know what this man's real name was. His party name was 'Ivan' and he was a Russian-Jewish intellectual who represented the Bund and was one of the principal leaders of our strike.

"I met him on the street and he didn't recognize me. At least I thought he didn't, so I stopped him and said: 'Ivan, it's me, David! Don't you know me?'

"'No, I don't,' he replied. 'Please leave me alone.'

"And he went on. I stood in the street, dumbfounded. The idea came to my mind that maybe Ivan didn't want to talk to me on the street because of his illegal position. But a few days later I learned the truth. Ivan had deserted the cause. The arrests had frightened him. He broke with the Bund and with all his friends and we never saw him again.

"I thought a long time about Ivan and his desertion, and one point kept coming back to my mind: *Ivan was an intellectual.* I became over-cautious and even suspicious towards intellectuals. This lasted quite a while, until the time when Shmul Domshevski was arrested in Lodz in 1908."

Shmul Domshevski was a well-known leader of the Bund. His party name was Noach, and Dubinsky told me that there are many immigrants in this country who still remember Noach well.

On January 8, 1908, an illegal meeting of the bakers' union was being held at Warschauer Hall on Poludniova Street in Lodz. Noach represented the Bund at this meeting and he was in the chair. Dubinsky sat next to him as secretary. Shortly after the meeting began, a man entered the room and whispered to Noach that the police had surrounded the building. Escape for all those at the gathering was out of the question; but a few could get away if they passed over to the leather-workers' local next door, from where one could reach the street through a back door. The man suggested that Noach himself, with a few others who were liable to the longest sentences in case of arrest, take advantage of this possibility.

Noach, like Ivan, was an intellectual. Dubinsky liked him, but after the incident with Ivan he had been inclined to think that there was a difference, and a very important one, between workers and their intellectual leaders. The workers fought for their own cause; the intellectuals joined them because of their convictions, but it was not their fight: they could at any moment pass through a door that led to a better life as professionals or even capitalists; the workers couldn't. A load dropped from Dubinsky's heart when Noach refused to budge.

"I'm responsible for this meeting and I'm going to stay here," he declared.

Dubinsky says that when they asked him whether he wanted to escape, he said "no" without any effort, almost joyfully. The boy's shattered belief in people had been restored.

All this happened forty years ago, but even today Dubinsky cannot remember that moment without deep emotion. He told me that it was the turning point of his life. Everything after that was somehow connected with those few seconds he lived through on January 8, 1908.

But this second arrest was a much more serious matter than the first. Dubinsky was only sixteen years old, but he was already known in the movement, and he had returned to Lodz without permission. This time bribes could be of no avail, for the political police took over the case. Most of the arrested were set free, but those considered dangerous were held, Noach and Dubinsky among them. A long period of questionings followed. One of the interrogating officers tried to break Dubinsky by pretending friendliness; he assured him at the start of every session that he, too, was a revolutionary in the depths of his heart and wished the young boy nothing but good.

"If you are a revolutionary, how do you

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

explain the fact that you are sitting there behind your desk, and I am here before you as a political prisoner?" Dubinsky asked him.

"Well, I'll tell you," the officer answered, obviously unprepared for this simple question. "It's like this: you and I believe in the revolution, but I think it is too soon for revolution as yet. It must come, but not too soon. In the meantime, I have to sit here and perform my duty. Understand what I mean?"

Dubinsky understood, and found the answer highly unsatisfactory. The officer found the behavior of the youngest of his prisoners equally so. The Russian political police, then as now, didn't bother too much about such things as an open trial. In fact, they could send people to Siberia without any trial at all. A few days after his last conversation with the too friendly officer, Dubinsky was informed that he was to be exiled to Siberia as a *"ssylnyi,"* which meant living in some small village under the surveillance of the police. But he wasn't told his exact destination; the governor of Siberia would decide that later on.

IN CZARIST Russia, prisons served as a sort of university for their political inmates. There they met better educated comrades, and only there did they have the time to read. Dubinsky benefited by this opportunity, but with a certain difference. During the eighteen months he spent in several prisons in the course of his journey to Siberia, he seldom came in contact with political prisoners. Noach-Domshevski and the others arrested with him had been sent elsewhere, and Dubinsky shared his prison cells mostly with criminals, many of them professional burglars and thieves; one or two were even murderers. From the beginning, Dubinsky was impressed by the fact that these men treated him with great friendliness and helped him in every way they could. They told him that this was because the "politicals" sacrificed themselves for "everybody."

This made a great impression on the young boy; he had never viewed his political activity in this light before. For him, everything he did had been pretty obvious. The bakers didn't get enough money to live on, so they had to fight for better wages. That was simple. But there was something else that bothered him—his father. Shortly after he had granted the higher wages demanded by his striking workers, Dubinsky's father, along with many other small bakers, had had to close down his shop for lack of money. Obviously, it wasn't his father's fault that the workers were so poorly paid. Noach had told him that before, but only now, in prison, could Dubinsky begin to read the books that might give him the real reasons.

In the Paviak prison in Warsaw and in the famous Butyrki prison in Moscow, Dubinsky met other "politicals": Jewish socialists from the Bund, Polish Social-Democrats and members of the PPS (Polish Socialist party), Russian socialists, etc.; they helped him to understand what he read. In the Butyrki, ordinary bedbugs also played a part in his education. There were millions of them in the dirty straw mattresses, so the prisoners would sleep on the bare floor, surrounding themselves with circles of water to keep the bugs away. But bugs are intelligent. They would crawl up the walls to the ceiling, go along the ceiling to the right place, and then drop straight down on the sleeping prisoners. Finding sleep impossible, Dubinsky and his friends talked, talked, talked, sometimes all night long. Just before daybreak, the bedbugs would disappear.

"YOU MUST remember," Dubinsky said, "that I was barely seventeen then, and it wasn't so easy for me to understand all the trends in the revolutionary movement. But I think that my years in Lodz and the prison days that followed helped me a lot. Even as a child I saw what despotism and dictatorship meant. . . . Totalitarian methods today are not very different from what I saw in my early youth: no free thought, no free press, no free unions, no books except those approved by the state. Of course they maintain now that all this is for the workers' own good, and they promise socialism and a better life in some distant future. In the meantime they put millions in forced-labor camps. I

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

don't believe that the end justifies the means. I don't believe that slave labor leads to socialism. I have always fought against despotism and against injustice, and that's why I fight against totalitarianism now. In fact, I think that my beliefs have changed in no way since the time I worked as a baker in Lodz. They had already been formed then, they grew stronger in prison, and they will never change."

The telephone rang. Mr. Dubinsky exchanged a few words with someone at the other end of the line, then hung up and said:

"That was a banker. He wanted to lend us a million dollars. He heard that we're giving a loan of one million to the state of Israel and he thought that maybe we'd be short of cash, so he wanted to help—and to earn a little money for his bank. But we have all the cash we need."

Mr. Dubinsky smiled:

"A million dollars! When I was arrested in Lodz the first time, we badly needed three rubles for leaflets. The printer refused to give them to us without payment. No cash—no leaflets. We finally raised the money in prison and sent it to him, but it wasn't easy. Three rubles—that was one dollar and fifty cents in American money."

From the Butyrki prison in Moscow, Dubinsky was sent to Samara (now Kuibyshev), where, after a stay in the local jail, he was put on a prison train bound for Tcheliabinsk. Before their departure all the prisoners were thoroughly searched. To conceal the little money they had, they used a trick that Dubinsky demonstrated to me with a couple of dollar bills. He folded them into a narrow strip which he put under his upper lip—nothing could be seen, even when he opened his mouth.

At the station in Samara "our train stood on a siding for a long time. I leaned out of a window with one Bystrov-Zorov, a Russian officer still in uniform, a political prisoner with whom I was friendly. We noticed two very young girls loitering about the station. We smiled at them and they smiled at us. One of them was very pretty and I liked her the moment I saw her. Suddenly she blew us a kiss. Bystrov-Zorov told me that the kiss was meant for me.

"'It's funny how a Jewess can always tell a Jew,' he said.

"I felt very proud and happy. The girls approached our car and the one who had thrown me a kiss asked: 'How is the chief warden?'

"My heart beat even faster. That question meant that the girls were 'politicals.' Only 'politicals' knew how important this question was to a political prisoner. The warden of a prison train could make life miserable, but he could help a great deal if he was decent.

"Our chief warden stood a little way off on the platform. I decided to use a little diplomacy and answered so loudly that he could hear me: 'The warden in Butyrki in Moscow was very bad, the warden in Samara prison was much better, and the warden we have now is the best.'

"The girl nodded her head and smiled. For a long, long while we didn't say anything but just looked at each other and smiled.

"'Where are you from?' I asked finally.

"'From Siedlce, in Poland. Are they taking you to Siberia?'

"'Yes.'

"She thought for a moment; then, turning to her companion, she whispered something. They both went away, but promised to come back. And they did, with a large bag of oranges, which the warden gave them permission to distribute among the prisoners. In the general pandemonium that followed, I suddenly heard Bystrov-Zorov's loud voice. Leaning out of the window, he shouted:

"'There aren't enough oranges! Bring more of them, quick!'

"When I heard this, I fainted. I suppose it was because I was so ashamed for Bystrov-Zorov. A few minutes passed before I came to. When I regained consciousness, the girls had gone and in a little while the train left the station.

"I think that to understand my state of mind you have to remember that I was very young then and I hadn't seen a single girl

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

for over a year. Sitting in the slow-moving train, all sorts of thoughts kept creeping into my head. I remembered a story that Ilya Reich, a Jewish poet, one of the prisoners on our train, had told me a few days earlier about a young girl, a political prisoner like ourselves, who was raped in a train by a guard. Somehow, for no reason at all, I decided that she must have been the same girl I saw in Samara. I became melancholy. I couldn't forget her. Night and day I clearly saw her face in memory, her sad, compassionate, beautiful smile. I kept thinking that maybe one day I would be free and then I would go to Siedlce and find her. But how could I find her? I didn't even know her name or anything about her. Was she a member of the Bund? Had she come to Samara to live or was she planning to go back to Siedlce?

"I wrote letters to friends in Poland. I did everything I could to find her, but to no avail. Well, I guess this is the end of that romantic story. . . ."

THE train took the prisoners to Tcheliabinsk, whence they were sent out on foot in small groups to Siberian villages. Dubinsky discovered that many of his friends, among them Josel Rosenberg and his wife Esther, political exiles like himself, had got permission to live in Tcheliabinsk itself. He at once wrote a letter to the local governor asking to be permitted to join them. And he was so optimistic that he also wrote to Rosenberg assuring him that he would see him very soon. But he never received an answer from the governor. And soon he was marching with a group of other exiles toward a small Siberian village he had never heard of before. This time he was the only political prisoner in the group.

In the minds of most people, Siberia evokes only one association: that of fierce, bitter cold. But Tcheliabinsk is on the threshold of Siberia and even in Siberia itself the summers are usually very hot. The party marched from eight in the morning to six in the evening, covering twenty to thirty miles a day, and the heat was intense—made worse for Dubinsky by the fact that his father had provided him only with heavy clothing. The prisoners were fed only black bread and hot water. Dubinsky marched for three, five, six days. He put some of his clothes into a sack that he carried on his back. Money was terribly important to the prisoners, much more than for free men. A few rubles were equal to thousands "outside," and the price of a pair of trousers or a woolen undershirt often meant the difference between life and death.

On the sixth day David succeeded in selling some of his clothes to one of the guards. But it didn't help much.

"After ten days," Dubinsky says, "I made up my mind to escape. I managed to place myself at the very end of the convoy and, to test the guards, lagged further and further behind. A guard approached me and asked: 'What are you up to? You want to escape?'

"The guard told us that in the village where we were to spend the night, there was a *felsher*—a medical aide—who was a political exile himself and who might help me to escape. He promised me to get the new guard to let me see this man. He kept his promise. I was sent to the medical aide immediately on arriving in the village. He was a Pole, a member of the Polish Socialist party. Unfortunately I don't remember his name.

"Together we worked out a plan. There was a railway station nearby, but it wouldn't do to get on a train there: the station would be watched after my escape. About twenty miles on, however, there was another small station. The *felsher* told me how to get there through the woods. Then my guard brought me back to the prisoners' hut.

"The most prominent man among the criminals in our party was one Krynin, a strong, hardened man and very taciturn. The other criminals always followed his lead. Early in the morning I gave Krynin my extra clothes, keeping only those I was wearing. I didn't ask him for any money and I didn't tell him why I was giving him the clothes. As a matter of fact, neither he nor I said a word. But he understood.

"A few minutes later I went to a latrine

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

that was quite far away from the hut and stayed there for at least fifteen minutes. I did this to test Krynin and the other criminals. They saw me go and I wanted to know whether they would tell the guards. They didn't. Krynin must have told them to keep quiet.

"The moment the guards sat down to breakfast, I quietly walked out. I went slowly, without looking back. I had an arrangement with the Polish medical aide: if the guards stopped me, I was to tell them that I was going to the hospital and he would confirm that he had ordered me to come. But no one challenged me. It is perfectly possible that the guards saw me go out and guessed my purpose. As I learned later, they weren't too eager to capture escaped prisoners. They received nine kopeks a day—five cents—for the rations for each of their charges; when a prisoner died en route or escaped, they managed to keep this money for themselves.

"Some distance from the hut, I began to run. But I had overestimated my strength, and had to stop very soon for rest. I realized how dangerous this was, but I simply couldn't go any further. There was a stack of straw in a nearby field. I crawled into it and immediately fell asleep. When I awoke the sun was already high. An hour or so later, when I was already making my way through the forest, I heard a horse coming behind me. I decided not to turn around or look at the rider when he passed me. But as he reached me he reined his horse in.

"'You're an escaped prisoner, aren't you?' he asked.

"He was a Cossack, but a peasant—not a soldier. This reassured me a bit.

"'What makes you say that?' I said with pretended indignation.

"'The straw,' he answered. 'If you weren't a fugitive, why would you be sleeping in a stack of straw?'

"Only then did I notice that I was covered from head to foot with bits of straw. It was no use denying what I was. But when I finished my story he didn't say a word and only looked at me, thinking hard.

"'Can you ride a horse?' he asked.

"'No, I can't. Why?'

"'Because you don't look very strong to me. Well, never mind. Let's go.'

"I KNEW by then that I was safe. He brought me to his village and introduced me to another peasant, a friend of his. He told him immediately that I was a fugitive, a political prisoner. This other peasant lived in a clean house, and in a corner of his best room there was an ikon on the wall. I shall never forget the expression on the face of this Russian peasant when he heard I was a political prisoner. He knelt before the ikon and prayed for me.

"After a night and a day in this village, they brought me in their farm wagon to the railway station I had been seeking, bought me a ticket to Tcheliabinsk, and put me on the train. They even gave me two rubles. I arrived in Tcheliabinsk late at night and took a droshky, giving the driver Josel Rosenberg's address. The driver couldn't find the exact street, but dropped me off in a dark alley, telling me it must be somewhere nearby. All the windows on the street were already dark, but I heard distant voices. Two women were conversing, but I couldn't make out whether they were talking Russian, Polish, or Yiddish. Having no passport, I decided to stay where I was until morning, and I spent the night between two piles of stones in the street. In the morning I was awakened by the kick of some passerby. He took me for a beggar and told me to go and sleep elsewhere because the police were very strict with beggars in that district. Next to the piles of stones was a house and a woman stood in the doorway. I asked her whether she knew where Josel Rosenberg lived.

"'He used to live in this very house, but he's no longer here,' she answered. 'You're David Dobniewski, aren't you? We've been expecting you.'

"'You expected me?'

"'Of course. We got your letter yesterday.'

"It was the letter I had sent from the prison, where the authorities were never too prompt in mailing the inmates' letters. It

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

had taken the whole of four weeks for my letter to get to its destination. Meanwhile, Rosenberg and my other friends had been sent to another place. But there were many other political exiles in Tcheliabinsk and we all lived like one big family for six months.

"THEN my father sent me twenty-five rubles from Lodz—by wire and on a Saturday. When the family reproached him for this, he told them that there was no sin in sending money on a Saturday if one had to save a man's life that way. Twenty-five rubles was a very large sum then. I returned to Lodz and got a job as a baker under an assumed name. Because of the police I had to change my sleeping place every night. At that time there was plenty of work for bakers and between Purim and Passover I often made as much as three rubles a night.

"And then my older brother, who lived in New York, sent me a ticket to America. I had earned enough money by that time to take my other brother with me. We were smuggled across the border. Once outside Russia we didn't need any passports nor did we need a visa to enter America. In those days, anybody who wanted to live and work there was welcome.

"Our boat reached New York on January 1, 1911. It was a Sunday and we had to wait until next day to disembark. From the ship's deck I saw high buildings faintly through the fog. In the evening lights began to flicker far away, on the streets, and soon a reddish glow lit the sky above the city.

"Only a narrow strip of water separated me from America, but inwardly I was still in Europe, on the streets of Lodz with their crooked sidewalks paved with gray, brown, and, sometimes, almost red flagstones, in the prison at Tcheliabinsk, and the Paviak jail in Warsaw. I thought of my friends there. I was still with them, and America and my presence in New York Harbor seemed like a dream.

"The glare over New York grew brighter. From time to time the wind would bring my way distant murmurs of the big city. . . ."

IN THE past two decades tens of thousands who shared David Dubinsky's convictions have had to be "liquidated" in Russia and, more recently, in Eastern Europe, to achieve that "final victory" of Soviet "socialism" which has so often been announced and yet somehow remains always in prospect. In this country Dubinsky is only one of the more outstanding among the thousands who found the opportunity in the labor movement and elsewhere to give expression to their passion for social justice and individual liberty which so strikingly parallels the best indigenous American tradition, and which in so many important ways has strengthened and enriched it.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE STRANGER AND THE VICTIM

The Two Jewish Stereotypes of American Fiction

IRVING HOWE

MOST novels about American Jews are afflicted with stereotyped characterizations. Seldom does the Jew appear in them as an individual; almost always he is made the representative of a group or subgroup (a "kind" of Jew: a good or a strange Jew); in the eyes of both writer and reader he is first *the* Jew and second *a* person. If conceived with hostility, he is drawn from hidden regions of the unconscious, for in America anti-Semitism is not respectable and therefore is largely repressed in public. (This perhaps explains the relative scarcity of Jewish characters in our fiction: the novelist, balking at the difficulties involved, simply suppresses his awareness of the existence of Jews.) If the object of sympathy, the Jew is put together out of the thin surfaces of conventional social-behavior patterns and idealizations. But it makes little moral or aesthetic difference which attitude the writer takes, since both deny the one right the Jew needs most: existence as a unique human being, with an individuality of his own. And in either case the central illusion of the novel—that it somehow "exists" as a refracted version of experience in which characters enjoy a spontaneous being—is destroyed. Without that illusion, a work of fiction is valueless.

To suggest reality, fictional characterization must project distinctive personalities. Even when a character is intended to represent a social type, he must first exist as an individual being. When stereotyped, a character becomes nothing more than a function of the author's perceptions, a bundle of the most obvious and superficial traits conventionally associated with a social type. Some of these traits may originally have had some relevance or reality since people in actual life often live according to conventional patterns, but at best their validity remains partial and external. And a fictional character in whose individuality we cannot believe is not likely to impress us as a valid representative of a social type. Another difficulty is that stereotypes tend to persist in fiction about Jews long after they have disappeared from reality. Thus, the Jewish father as sage and scholar reflected the existence of a certain type in Jewish life, but most actual Jewish fathers were not dreamers or prophets—and in present-day America the type has become virtually extinct. Yet the stereotype survives in current fiction.

Almost all fictional characterizations of Jews stem from two great historical myths, and most of them from an interweaving of these myths. The first, and by far the most powerful, is almost an invariable of Christian civilization: the Jew as Judas, as devil, as alien and therefore suspect. The second, less substantial myth is a result of the philo-Semitism that arose during the Enlightenment and was strengthened by the bourgeois democratic revolutions. The first myth is found in the work of Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Marlowe; the second one most classically in George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda.* It is interesting that most Jewish authors also order their novels, whether consciously or not, according to these myths. The stigmatized help perpetuate their own stigma.

Whether novels indulge in aggressive denunciation of Jews or sentimental pleading for them, they are bound together by one common assumption: that the Jews are not human like other people, somehow not subject to the same pressures of experience as other men. Whether illimitably sinister or

---

IRVING HOWE here traces the changing outlines of the figure of the Jew as he has appeared in American fiction over the past fifty years, and suggests, on the basis of copious documentation, how limited and repetitious have been the patterns, and how inadequate the art with which writers both Jewish and non-Jewish have dealt with Jewish experience and personality on the American scene. Mr. Howe, who has been a frequent contributor to COMMENTARY, was born in New York in 1920 and attended the College of the City of New York and Brooklyn College.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

uncannily wise, Jews appear in fiction as odd, strange, different by nature. Let us look at some of the prevalent stereotypes in which the two major myths about the Jews are expressed and interwoven.

Rags to Riches

THE primary fact about the life of the Jew in America is that until quite recently he was almost always an immigrant. Since the turn of the century New York City's Lower East Side has been the focal point of Jewish immigrant life, and in American fiction has been transformed from an actual place into a symbolic presence dominating all the characters created in its image. Most novels written about the Lower East Side have followed a common pattern: a conflict between Orthodox father and Americanized son in the midst of which is trapped the faithful, perplexed mother.

Inevitably these novels are full of sentimental stereotypes. In dripping prose, Samuel Ornitz's *Haunch, Paunch and Jowl* and Michael Gold's *Jews Without Money* seize on every unfamiliar custom, every touch of "quaintness," to pander to the public conception of the East Side as an exotic curiosity. Their novels abound in all the expected symmetrical contrasts—the "sights and sounds"; the rabbis and prostitutes uneasily jostling each other; the bums and the intellectuals lost in common futility; the idealistic virgins and yielding servant girls equally betrayed. Here even poverty becomes a curiosity, a piece of local color to be waved before the eyes of American readers. These caricatures are all the more malicious in that their creators intend no malice.

It is remarkable that Gold's Communist hero should indulge in reminiscences essentially similar in outlook to those of Ornitz's reactionary judge. Both view the East Side, and thereby all of life, in the same masochistic-sentimental terms. And though Ornitz was attempting irony and Gold wanted a passionately direct statement, neither was capable of that balanced regard for the object which is the prerequisite of realistic fiction. Thus the nostalgia of Ornitz, Gold, and a host of others for the days of their youth is really a libel; their elegies on its vanished color conceal a rejection of its human qualities. Their apologies for the East Side have meaning only as repudiations.

One novel did view the East Side without succumbing to the prevalent stereotypes. In *The Rise of David Levinsky,* Abraham Cahan, too, takes as his theme the rise of an immigrant from East Side poverty to wealth. But in probing the failure of David Levinsky to live a meaningful life, he rejects the sentimental falsehood that wealth necessarily brings decay, and the parochial falsehood that rich Jews inevitably come to an unhappy end because they try to assimilate themselves to the Gentile world. Levinsky's life is a failure because he has had to destroy in himself the social and moral values he absorbed in his childhood.

Levinsky realizes in the end that his success has been achieved by wilfully truncating his personality. But this self-destruction is not seen as the necessary result of Americanization as such; it is only the logical outcome of his acceptance of Babbittry, which of all aspects of American life is least compatible with the roots of his personal life. Never making this idea too explicit, Cahan skillfully weaves it through the whole fabric of his novel. Often he can trap in one image the whole character of Levinsky's development: "At this time the magic word 'credit' loomed in letters of gold before me. I was aware of the fascination of check-books. . . ." Cahan gave a validity to the rags-to-riches theme that none of the sentimentalists could; he transformed the abstract idea into a dramatic conflict embodying a genuine moral dilemma. His fiction was buttressed by a Marxist outlook but not imprisoned in a dogmatic straitjacket.

Cahan's achievement was possible because he wrote from a secure base. He did not suffer from the ambiguous feelings about his relations with Jewish life and the American world that were to afflict later writers. He was in both worlds, the Jewish and the American, and since he believed strongly in their continuity and contiguity he felt no need to apologize for one to the other. His viewpoint was that of a socialist and his cultural medium was Yiddish—a combination giving rise to attitudes of irony and detachment that permitted him to observe the two worlds and their interactions with a sharply sardonic eye. (The native American, Cahan shrewdly noticed, has an "unsmiling smile." American businessmen "laugh with their teeth only.") Thus Cahan's novel, published

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

in 1917, remains one of the best products of American naturalism.

The Great Romance

THERE is a maudlin Jewish folk tale perpetuated by old women who feel themselves neglected by their children: At the command of his wife, a man once cut out his mother's heart. While bringing the heart to his wife, he dropped it on the ground where it crumbled into many pieces. The son wailed that now he would not be able to satisfy his wife's demand for his mother's heart; but from the earth there rose a gentle voice: "Do not weep, my child, your mother's heart will mend itself so that you may bring it to your wife."

The great romance of American Jewish life is between mother and son. It can be found in almost every novel written about the Jewish family in America; the heroes of these novels may be different, but they are all born of the same mother: patient, loving, sweet, a trifle uncomprehending and humorless, everlastingly faithful—a stereotype compounded equally of filial self-deception, nostalgia, and guilt. She appears in the novels of as diverse a group of writers as Sholem Asch, Ludwig Lewisohn, Thyra Samter Winslow, Samuel Ornitz, Jerome Weidman, Budd Schulberg, and—Thomas Wolfe. She is the most celebrated contemporary heroine of the Oedipal myth, and, as the folk tale above indicates, she is herself ready to join in the celebrating.

One American Jewish writer has raised this stereotype to a genuine characterization. Genya, in Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep*, is so endlessly patient and innocent that it is evident she has been conceived as "the Jewish mother"; yet Roth has poured so much feeling and vitality into this characterization that we eventually become convinced of her independent existence.

This highly serious novel describes the relationship between the six-year-old David and his mother entirely in terms of the child's own perceptions. Roth sustains this perspective throughout the novel; never does the child's vision become confused with his own. A remarkable sympathy exists between son and mother, which puts them in league against the father, a harried man who hates David with a wrath he cannot motivate or understand. The father's preoccupation with bread-winning sours his personality and makes even more unbearable his resentment of the affection Genya lavishes on their child. Each incident of the novel complicates its web of human misunderstanding and misery; each development of its relations accentuates the innocent tyranny of maternal love.

Genya is a superb figure: gracious, loving, innocently oblivious to the self-indulgent aspects of her love for the child. The delicately ambivalent nature of the mother-child relationship, so full both of horror and innocence, is lyrically expressed when Genya fondles her child: "'I really believe,' she continued in a scolding and bantering whisper, 'that you think of nothing. Now honest, isn't that so? Aren't you just a pair of eyes and ears? You see, you hear, you remember, but when will you know? And no kiss?' She caught him by the shoulders, kissed him. 'There! Savory, thrifty lips.'"

The child's sense of guilt becomes a dominating obsession—the guilt caused by his father's arbitrary and awesome wrath, by his discovery that his own mother is a woman like other women, and most of all by his trembling uncertainty about his own existence. In this child there rumble all the terrors of innocence and guilt, of expiation and damnation, of separation and identification that oppress adult life. His pitiful father becomes for David the symbol of exterior wrath, the surely deserved punishment for all those secret, barely divined guilts borne by the child's precocious consciousness. "Answer me, his words rang out. Answer me, but they meant, Despair! Who could answer his father? In that dread summons the judgment was already sealed. Like a cornered thing, he shrank within himself, deadened his mind because the body would not be deadened, and waited. Nothing existed any longer except his father's right hand. . . ." Who could answer his father?

In *Call It Sleep* the personal patterns of Jewish immigrant life are presented with the same validity as are its social patterns in *The Rise of David Levinsky*. Two lone books of truth and imagination in a sea of mediocrity!

The Father as Patriarch

IF IN the legend of Jewish immigrant life the mother's function is to love, then the father's is to understand. He is the repository

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of racial wisdom; even when he picks his nose, there is revealed in this act something of the philosopher and seer. Of course, he is not really at home in America. In Europe, the legend runs, he spent his time as a dedicated religious student who did not concern himself with the things of this world. But in America he is overwhelmed by the problem of earning a living, his personality is assaulted by the pressures of an alien and heathen world, and he suffers the pain of seeing the cleavage between himself and his Americanized children widen each day. That is the pattern, and most writers accept it.

Sholem Asch, never one to neglect a stereotype, has created the central character of *East River*, Moshe Davidowsky, in this image. Though forced to work as a grocer, Davidowsky is still the Jewish patriarch, the neighborhood dispenser of wisdom. No matter how much unhappiness his children cause him (one son is stricken with paralysis and the other marries a *shiksa*—apparently equal strokes of misfortune), he eventually forgives them. In an act of symbolic religious reconciliation, he accepts his Gentile daughter-in-law, thus adding a Christian tinge to his Judaic halo; but by the novel's end, his goodness and patience have become ludicrous. Asch combines the melodrama of a Second Avenue tear-jerker with the contrivances of American soap opera, adds a pinch of his homemade religiosity, and reaches the best-seller lists. . . .

The father in Ludwig Lewisohn's *The Island Within* is cut from the same stencil. Lewisohn's Levy, a German Jew, is more tolerant of his son's *shiksa* than is Davidowsky, but Lewisohn is a less skillful contriver than Asch, and Levy is never more than a dignified cipher, the product of his creator's tendency to apostrophize rather than delineate character. Both these writers are so obsessed with their conceptions of Jewishness that they cannot create a Jew.

A more satisfactory version of the father-as-seer is given in Albert Halper's *Sons of the Fathers*. Unlike Davidowsky and Levy, Halper's Saul Bergman has something of the ambiguity and imperfection of a human being. A Yiddish sceptic whose only certainty is life itself, with its simple processes and rhythms, he questions all worldly affairs beyond the range of his immediate experience. Believing the world to be a jungle, he hopes only to cut a little clearing for his family.

On Armistice Day in 1918, the news that his son has been killed reaches him, and while the streets are full of cheering mobs, he searches for a *minyan* to say the prayer for the dead. What the mob forgets he remembers; while the thoughtless cheer he weeps. At this point he reaches his full stature, his awareness of tragic destiny. One believes in both his existence and in the need for his existence; he is really a father.

Yet *Sons of the Fathers* is a poor novel because it is as a whole a pattern of stereotypes through whose limitations the main character has managed to erupt. In creating Bergman, Halper wrote, as it were, over his head. Nothing in the rest of the book has any genuine relationship with Bergman, and Halper's effort to exalt the private values destroyed by war collapses into the philistinism of completely un-ironic acceptance; life is good; the family exists; there is . . . oh yes, there *is* a father!

The Bohemian Rejection

IF THE life of the Jew in America, at least before the 1930's, was embodied fictionally in the sentimental family stereotype, then it was inevitable that sooner or later a Jewish writer would appear to reject that stereotype violently and completely. But when that Jewish writer did appear he fell into a reactive stereotype equally one-sided and false. Though many Jewish writers had urged assimiliation to American life, the first to attack Jewish group existence from a standpoint close to fashionable Bohemian anti-Semitism was Ben Hecht in *A Jew in Love*.

Hecht's Jo Boshere is a product of the 20's: shallow, flamboyant, pretentious, and, in retrospect, unspeakably silly. His is the pose of a Bohemian trying to be clever and *au courant;* Hecht's hero is neither an individual nor the representative of a type; he is simply a monster. Specializing in emotional asasults on his friends, this gutter Don Juan engages in a wearisome succession of frenetic love affairs whose pleasure consists only in sadistic chase and masochistic rejection. He is a looter of egos—the amatory parallel of the common myth about the social or economic role of the Jews.

Whatever Hecht's original intention, or Boshere's initial resemblance to the actual

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

person from whom he was drawn, his figure turns very soon into a vehicle for Hecht's subterranean articulation of some of the more newfangled myths of anti-Semitism: "The niggerish delight of the Jew in the blonde was no part of Boshere's enthusiasm in his new conquest. . . ." "These Jews decadent, humanless, with minds sharp as banjos, offer through the mask of their perversities the last blatant sob of Jewish culture. . . . Their songs quiver with self-pity, are full of unscrupulous wailings of ancient Jewish griefs . . . pounded home with the rabbinical slobber of an atonement prayer. . . ." "Sara of the tribe of soft and oriental Jewesses whose lips need no painting, whose cheeks bloom with pale, ivoried roses, whose eyes float like black seeds in a juicy pod, had dominated the doctor's senses through six years of marriage. Pictorially they made a pretty union, the Hebraic madonna and the moonlit Talmudist. . . . Sara possessed that calm, undemeaning servility which lights the love of a true Jewess."

It is difficult in 1949 to take Hecht's ideas or prose very seriously. In light of the terrors we have become acquainted with since, the novel's bizarre vagaries seem almost comic, like the posturings of a precocious adolescent. What is interesting, however, is the possible connection between Hecht's strange novel and his later political activities on behalf of terrorists in Palestine.

Through Native Eyes

Few non-Jewish writers have dared to express themselves freely about Jews; many of them, even if they did feel free to express their deepest attitudes, would not know what they were. So pervasive is this self-censorship that when Gentile writers do risk creating Jewish characters they usually produce idealizations that are merely the slanders turned inside out. Not that such writers are "really anti-Semitic"; such a view is much too simple and, what is more, quite untrue. I mean rather that the pull of the conventional symbol is so powerful that even when writers feel sympathy towards Jews they often express it in censored and not genuinely spontaneous perceptions.

The Gentile American novelists think of the Jew primarily as a means of setting off, of sharpening by contrast their vision of America. They see him, usually, as a stranger, an emanation of the romantic past, somehow connected with Europe and its wisdom, sophistication, and over-ripeness. The stereotype fluctuates between two traditional extremes. On the one hand, the Jew is seen as highly self-conscious and calculating, never able to "let himself go," always measuring the advantages to be gained from personal relations. On the other hand, he is seen as deeply passionate, richly steeped in his heritage, "oriental." Often these logically incompatible stereotypes are blended into a single fictional character.

In Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood,* the stereotype of the Jew as stranger is represented by Felix, a wandering Jew—he wanders from salon to salon, "searching for the correct thing to which to pay tribute." He is so calculating that he can never act on the decisions he formulates: he is paralyzed by the process of decision. The author records that on one occasion he let go of his emotions as much as he, a Jew, could. In that remark is summed up her conception of the Jew: a man forever chained to self-consciousness.

The brilliant old scientist Gottlieb of Sinclair Lewis's *Arrowsmith* is a Jewish stereotype because of what might be considered a case of mistaken identity. An extreme version of the scientist (an irascible extension of what many Americans imagine Einstein to be), he is so impersonal a being that there is no necessary reason for his being a Jew at all. Lewis seems to feel that Gottlieb must be a Jew only because he is first a scientist. For it is a common American belief that great theoretical scientists are brilliant but eccentric; that this eccentricity is somehow connected with foreignness (that is, Jewishness); and that therefore most great scientists are Jews. As a writer who, despite a superficially satirical outlook, largely accepts America on its own terms, Lewis uncritically borrowed this notion of the scientist as Jew from the common store of folk belief. His portrait of Gottlieb is therefore a stereotype of a stereotype.

When we come to Thomas Wolfe, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Ernest Hemingway, we are dealing with writers of far greater abilities than any yet discussed. Yet they, too, viewed the Jew in much the same hackneyed way that most Americans do.

Thomas Wolfe was fascinated by Jews. No other writer so nearly expressed in their

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

most primitive terms American folk attitudes towards "the strangers from the East." In Wolfe's lust for knowledge, he saw them as the knowing people; in his lust for experience, he saw them as the people in whom there still throbbed memories of the times of David—and precisely because they seemed most to represent the depths for which he yearned, did he most suspect them. He feared and loved them as a child fears something strange and grand and old. *Of Time and the River* is full of all this. Eugene Gant's friend, Abe Jones, has a face that is "a vast, gray acreage of painful Jewishness and involuted intellectualism." Abe's spirit is "as steady as a rock, as enduring as the earth. . . . The sight of his good gray, ugly face could always evoke for Eugene the whole wrought fabric of his life in the city, the whole design of wandering and return. . . ." Abe is "dreary, tortured, melancholy, dully intellectual, and joylessly poetic, his spirit gloomily engulfed in a great cloud of Yiddish murk . . . yet a dogged, loyal and faithful friend, the salt of the earth. . . ." Jewesses are "as old as nature and as round as the earth . . . they had a curve in them . . . the strong convulsive faces . . . ripe with grief and wisdom . . . female, fertile, yolky, fruitful as earth. . . ."

Has ever a writer paid a more involuted and preposterous tribute? For Wolfe never saw individuals: where there lived a person, he saw a "race." All that was weird, fearful, strange, passionate, and *deep*—the Unknown and the Knowing, in the quest of which he spent his life—Wolfe found in the Jews. To this profoundly indigenous American they seemed the very personification of that Otherness which he always sought. For him the Jews were the forbidden fruit, and he bit into it eagerly.

F. Scott Fitzgerald, a writer with much more self-awareness than Wolfe, also saw the Jew as an alien whom he could not quite understand. But he was interested in the Jew, not because the Jew was "ripe with grief and wisdom," but because he could be used as a dramatic symbol to fix Fitzgerald's vision of America as a civilization of grace entering its decline.

In *The Great Gatsby,* the Jew Meyer Wolfsheim, a professional gambler, is used to personify the essentially impersonal forces of corruption that bring tragedy to the "simple" American, Jay Gatsby. This was the primary aspect of the myth: the Jew as a source of pollution. Near the end of his life, in the unfinished novel *The Last Tycoon,* Fitzgerald turned to the other side of the coin. Monroe Stahr, the Jewish film producer who is the hero of Fitzgerald's *The Last Tycoon,* is one of the few genuinely tragic heroes of American literature. Into him Fitzgerald poured all his yearnings for a state of human grace; all his desire for sustained and facile creativity; all his deeply pessimistic conviction that the things he so desperately wanted were doomed. Stahr, an instinctive master with no ordered comprehension of his art, seemd to Fitzgerald the most adequate symbol of the tragedy of American life: Stahr, the creator, the craftsman, the Jew, could not survive in America. In this very deepening of the myth, its nature becomes clear: if for Fitzgerald America had become barren and Stahr represented the surviving principle of the creative, that contrast was possible only because Stahr was somehow alien, a Jew whose creativity did not flow from American sources. Like Joyce he chose a Jew for his most deeply felt symbol of his sense of the human fate, as well as for a final puzzled apostrophe to human potentiality.

Of all the American writers who approached the Jew as a stranger, none succeeded in depicting him as well as did Ernest Hemingway in *The Sun Also Rises.* Hemingway saw Robert Cohn as a unity of both extremes of the Jew-as-stranger stereotype. Cohn was both more calculating and more natural, more inhibited and more passionate than his Gentile friends. Since Hemingway's perceptions were always of a palpable thing or being, he was unable to think in abstractions; and so "the Jew" became Robert Cohn, an individual creature of flesh and blood.

Cohn is not an admirable character. He is an outsider and "different," but Hemingway does not allow him the excuse of a youth "scarred by poverty." Though Cohn's external experience is the same as that of his expatriate friends, he is not at home in their world; he breaks their accepted patterns of behavior. In Hemingway's world of cripples, Robert Cohn is a special kind of cripple. His friends resent Cohn because he has opin-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ions, because he talks instead of grunting, because he still takes the trouble to articulate his feelings. He cannot relax with them into drunkenness and restful inarticulateness. To that extent, he is the Jew who calculates and can't let himself go. But at the same time Cohn is the most viable character of the novel. He at least feels and reacts. Often enough his manners are bad, but he does retain his emotional vitality, no matter how unattractive some of its consequences may be. In a world of dried-out wrecks, he still thrashes about. As the others are cursed by some variety of imposed physical or psychological impotence, Cohn is cursed by his bar to grace: his Jewishness. Yet Cohn is a triumph of characterization: a Jew who is both a Jew and a human being. And once a Jew has been granted truly human status, he has been granted everything.

Nothing to Lose but Your Chains

THE great dividing line in American fiction about Jews was the depression era. In the novels of the 30's and 40's, the Jew was assigned new roles. He was now the young radical, the small businessman, or just the Jew for whom one felt sorry or raised placards. He became a favorite "subject" of problem novels, a "terrible lesson" to whom novelists of the slogan pointed dramatically. The older stereotypes of the Jew, in which he was conceived primarily as the stranger, were at least based on a certain curiosity about his life. But in these more recent stereotypes, which showed the Jew as a victim, he was simply abstracted into a convenient symbol toward which writers could take a stance. It was an exchange of masks—from an exotically colored one to a rigidly blank one.

The "Jewish radical," who turned up in virtually all of the now happily forgotten "Marxist" novels, was a New York boy, of course; he came from poor parents and his father was usually a garment worker; he was a CCNY graduate, very brainy and rebellious—though given to occasional lapses into petty-bourgeois moodiness (Jews, it is well known, are very moody). In the end he always managed to overcome the handicaps of his background as well as the suspicions of the workers whose strikes he invariably led.

There was just enough blurred truth in this stereotype to make it easily recognizable. In fact, it was too recognizable. Precisely because of the verisimilitude of the externals, it became the more obvious that nothing of the actual individual quality of the Jewish radicals of our time had really been described, nothing of their genuine experience and feeling projected. Life as a radical was never so simple, so monolithic, so dull as these novels made it seem.

In all of American fiction one recalls only one somewhat convincing characterization of a Jewish radical: Ben Compton in John Dos Passos's *USA*. Without inner life, unable to talk to people because he can talk only at mass meetings, Compton ends his political career by breaking with the Communist party. Distrusted by his former comrades, weak from police beatings and jail sentences, quite without belief or orientation, Compton personifies for the Dos Passos of the early 30's his own most poignant attitude: his commitment to the necessity of rebellion and his belief in its hopelessness.

Alfred Kazin has pointed out that *USA* is an attempt to rewrite the American myth in the bitter terms of social bifurcation, of a nation split into warring classes; and its characters suffer from the fact that they are often symbolic versions of social forces rather than genuine individuals. But Dos Passos's own passionate intervention in his novel manages to some extent to overcome this weakness. The lonely rebel, the stubborn fighter doomed to defeat—this is the one thread of American belief Don Passos still accepts, and which he identifies, in the person of Ben Compton, with the Jew. So fierce is Dos Passos's paean to rebellion and so warm his love for Ben, that for a moment we can forget that this Ben, the most rebellious of Jews, is more a generalized tribute than a genuinely realized character.

The Artist as Businessman

AT THE other extreme of value and vocation, there appeared in American fiction of the late 30's the Jewish shoestring businessman, representing all that was rotten in big-city life.

Jerome Weidman and Budd Schulberg, focussing on the Jewish "operator," offer their novels as realistic and critical approaches to metropolitan Jewish life. Many Jewish critics, however, have denounced their novels as slanders, deriving from the "self-hatred"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of "alienated Jewish intellectuals." Both views are simplifications. There is much healthy critical perception in Weidman's and Schulberg's novels, but obviously there is also something more that is both disturbing and irritating. This "something more," which, I think, is felt by every perceptive reader, is not anti-Semitism. Actually, Weidman and Schulberg are as romantic about Jews as Lewisohn or Ornitz, and their caricatures of Jews arise from attitudes as sentimental as the idealizations against which they rebelled. Weidman and Schulberg continue to portray Jews as members of a specially endowed group with powers beyond the range of ordinary mortals; in a strange way, they see them as still a "chosen people."

Harry Bogen, the hero of Weidman's *I Can Get It For You Wholesale,* is a small garment manufacturer, vulgar and utterly unscrupulous. He is a recognizable facsimile of a distinct social type and at the same time a sharply demarcated individual. Bogen personifies the small Jewish entrepreneur who feels that, in order to survive, he must accept and drive to its extreme the amoral ethos of American business life. Yet he knows better, he doesn't fool himself about the meaning of his choice: "I had to laugh at these *goyim* and their politeness. They aren't born smart, like Jews. And they know it, and it scares them. So they figure out a substitute. They act like gentlemen to each other. They're polite all the time, so they can be sure one won't screw the other. . . ."

Though Bogen believes he is beating the *goyim* at their own game, he feels that he is somehow different from them. By carrying the traditional caricature of the Jewish businessman to an extreme that even the *goyim* don't anticipate, Bogen confirms his conviction of superiority: if a Jew is smart he can do anything—and Jews are smart.

Budd Schulberg's *What Makes Sammy Run?* is cut on the same pattern, but more crudely. Schulberg writes in a slick wise-guy prose—the style of those for whom Toots Shor's is the seat of American culture and "to make with" a universal verb. His Sammy Glick is so gruesome a caricature, such a horror of selfishness and misanthropy, that one questions the relevance of his existence (even if that existence is granted) to any sort of moral or social reality. He exists, if he exists at all, in moral isolation; he cannot be significantly related to either life or literature; he is drawn according to the Hollywood conception of character. And unlike Harry Bogen, he is not even sentimental about his mother.

Schulberg glibly explains Sammy's adult misanthropy in terms of an ugly, poverty-stricken childhood, thereby fusing the two major stereotypes about the Jewish businessman. But neither the too inclusive denunciation of Sammy as an adult nor the too easy explanation of his character in terms of childhood unhappiness is satisfactory; together they overload Schulberg's novel with embarrassing clichés (Sammy's mother is "sensitive with the sufferings of five thousand years. . . .").

This odd mixture of hatred and sentimentality—quite sincerely expressed by Weidman, consciously manipulated by Schulberg—reveals less of their approach toward Jews than of their feelings about themselves. On closer examination, Harry Bogen and Sammy Glick seem to be lay figures on which are projected frustrations and conflicts rooted in quite another area of American life. More like skilled technicians than serious artists, Weidman and Schulberg have in varying ways succumbed to Broadway's commercialism, anti-intellectualism, cheap cleverness, and easy success. Yet somewhere in them, I would guess, is an awareness of their self-betrayal as writers. (Schulberg knows more than Weidman, but seems to care less.) May not the terrible viciousness of their portraits of Jewish businessmen be an index less of their "self-hatred" as Jews than of their feelings about their own status as artists? When they write with passionate hatred of their characters' deviations from what they conceive to be Jewish morality, are they not perhaps castigating themselves for their own deviations from the highest artistic morality? Through their portraits of the Jew as businessman they may thereby be expressing their contempt for the artist as businessman—which, if at all true, would be a curious use of the popular stereotypes of the Jew as both the stranger and the cunning exploiter.

The Jew as Placard

After the European catastrophe a large number of novelists discovered not so much the Jew as "the Jewish problem"; their novels are usually of great moral earnestness

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

but slight literary interest, for their message seldom emerges from a serious imaginative structure.

A forerunner of this kind of novel is Ludwig Lewisohn's *The Island Within*. Written in a tone of oppressive earnestness that sometimes does reach a certain Biblical eloquence, it implores American Jews to return to the ways of their fathers. The story drives so inexorably to its destined goal (Lewisohn confuses his will with destiny) that the breath of life, of contingency and variety, is banished. *The Island Within* contains only one active character: Lewisohn himself, the Jeremiah thundering against assimilation.

Lewisohn bases his rejection of assimilation on the failure of his hero, Arthur Levy, to succeed in his marriage with the Gentile Elizabeth, but his account of that marriage is so obviously contrived according to antecedent ideological biases, that its failure is unavoidable and unconvincing. Nor do the characters in this book come to Jewishness at the end of an independent quest; they have it thrust upon them by the author. The result is more a tract than a novel, with the moral smothering both narrative and characterization.

A NUMBER of journalist-novelists have also written recently on the "Jewish problem." They possess neither the eloquence nor the seriousness of Lewisohn, and where his writing collapses under the weight of his moral, theirs simply dissolves into thin air for lack of any weight at all.

For Laura Hobson and Arthur Miller the "Jewish problem" is stated and solved in journalistic terms. Miss Hobson reduces the problem to a means of indicating her superior moral position (the liberal whose heart is in the right place). Written in a cuddly popular style, *Gentleman's Agreement* rests on the agonizingly superficial notion that to demonstrate the painful results of anti-Semitism is to convince people that it is evil. The novel itself is the real stereotype—the stereotype of a gesture of good will, with all the heartless indifference toward human reality that mere gestures of good will always entail.

Arthur Miller's *Focus*, another "problem novel," resembles nothing so much as a melodramatic movie scenario. The protagonist, Newman, is attacked by his Christian Front neighbors in Queens because his name "sounds Jewish" and his face "looks Jewish." Shocked into an awareness of how mean—and undiscriminating—anti-Semitism can be, Newman identifies himself in the end with the Jews. *Focus* is built on a mere trick—for if anti-Semites were intelligent instead of stupid, Newman wouldn't be hurt, he wouldn't care, and there'd be, apparently, neither a novel nor a problem. As a product of the Stalinoid mentality, *Focus* generates ideological phantoms rather than characters; it provokes pre-established and confirmed reactions rather than fresh insights or emotions; its only claim to individuality is a brutal and violent style, as hard and glossy as a GPU man's blackjack.

Jo Sinclair's *Wasteland* substitutes psychiatry for "liberalism" or Stalinism as the solution to the "Jewish problem." For Miss Sinclair Jewishness is something to which one adjusts—like an artificial leg or the menopause. But like so many other results of the "adjustments" arranged by popular ameliorative psychiatry, Miss Sinclair's case-work Jewishness is without substance, variety, color, or character. *Wasteland* is an appropriate novel with which to end a discussion about "Jewish problem" novels, for it exaggerates their faults to final absurdity by hoisting a placard completely and terrifyingly blank.

TO THE extent that one can discern any trend in the characterization of Jews in American novels of the last few decades, it is toward an increasingly totalitarianized vision of the Jew. While almost all of the novels discussed in the early part of this essay saw the Jew either as a sentimental souvenir or as a stranger and alien, they at least showed a certain live curiosity about him. But in novels of the 30's and 40's, the characterization of Jews has been frozen into a calculated gesture. Seldom genuinely interested in the novel as an art form, most contemporary writers who deal with Jews devote themselves to scoring points in behalf of some rather simple and obvious thesis. As a result, their portraits of "the Jew" become merely ideological figments. Beside the regimented abstractions of such writers as Hobson, Miller, and Sinclair, the characterization of Jews in the novels of the 20's seems positively full of variety and color.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

It is by now extremely difficult to say just what we mean when we demand that a Jewish character in fiction be shown as an individualized human being, rather than a stereotype. When is a Jew in fiction—or in life—human, and when is he a stereotype? Cannot the creators of stereotyped Jewish characters claim that their work has verisimilitude because Jewish life is itself stereotyped? And by what norm—in the modern world!—are we to measure the human?

These questions cannot be answered in simple and unhazardous terms. The catastrophic blend of "high" and "low" cultures in our time has resulted in a debasement of the former and a weedlike growth of the latter, which make it difficult to keep sharply demarcated the authentic experience or rendering of experience from the inauthentic. That may be why those few writers who have tried, with some success, to create genuine Jewish characters—Daniel Fuchs, Michael Seide, Delmore Schwartz, Isaac Rosenfeld, Saul Bellow—have begun by deliberately sloughing off large preconceptions and rhetorical patterns. The most accomplished of these writers, Delmore Schwartz, is characterized by an insistent determination to return to the simplest facts and patterns of Jewish experience as the only means of reaching its possible larger meanings.

The mechanized characterizations of Jews in most recent novels is not, however, an isolated phenomenon; it is part of a general social tendency. For when the American novel characterizes Jews by means of stereotypes—when it in fact assumes the existence of that generic monster, "the" Jew—it drives to an extreme a tendency already present in all areas of modern life. The Jew cannot reach full human status in American literature and life because modern man cannot reach that status. When a Jew cries out, "I am *a* man," and society replies, "No, you are *the* Jew," his dilemma is but an extreme version of every other man's.

BIG CRASH OUT WEST

PETER VIERECK

THEY call streets "boulevards" and build them huge
Where grandpa's ox-cart could not budge;
Here's room for elbows, land of the brave fourth gears.
Speed is the bridge for spanning loneliness.
Until.
This is the western way to die.
And when the car stops burning, thar he'll lie,
Surrounded by the brothers of his lodge.
O Crash for whom their boredoms cry,
Is there—in your sensuous instant—time to guess
At what's unspent, at what's unsaved, unsensuous years
Never hot with doubt nor faith nor reverence for tears?

PETER VIERECK's volume of poetry, *Terror and Decorum,* was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in poetry for 1948. He is also the author of *Metapolitics* (1941), a historical analysis of German fascism. His latest book, *Conservatism Revisited,* will be published by Scribner's this fall. Mr. Viereck was born in New York in 1916.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THIS ANCIENT CLOUD

A Story

MICHAEL SEIDE

At 14th Street a few of the nickel-nursers fled, but a fresh bunch rushed in, including a hefty woman high in her descending years who tried to squeeze in next to Joe. He shrank as much as possible to make himself scarce for her sake, but she kept squirming in an effort to slide in the whole of her buttocks, plainly furious with him. He was surprised to be singled out. But then—as he sized her up in a second—he guessed that she was just another one of those unfortunates who have been so long harried by the hound of unhappiness, who have become so fantastically spent and bloodless in the chase that they must always seize and suck on someone in revenge—so he decided to grin and bear it. However she began to mumble. It was amusing. She said—and she was shrill—that it would certainly do him no harm if he tried to move over a bit. He examined his sardine existence, and shrugging his shoulders, smiled right at her as he asked her—where? Then he ought to stand up like a gentleman, she said, and let a lady have a decent seat who had been pounding the pavement all day long. But from where *he* was sitting he could see that *she* was sitting, so here was her chance, let her rest quietly—all right?

Well, anyway, at this point it was nice because it made Rosalie speak to him for the first time since in the street because she was curious to know—to who was he speaking to—to who—it sounded awful. It was nothing—he shushed her—nothing at all. But the bitter antagonist on his other side was far from through. She leaned over to regard them both shrewdly, and then said something which Rosalie could not completely catch—it was a question about their being—but which so astonished Joe (he knew—he knew at once what the poor misguided woman meant by it) that he withdrew from her as far as he could—refusing to answer.

Lucky it was their stop.

"What did she say?" Rosalie asked.

But he only shook his head and led her out.

"I didn't get it," said Rosalie. "She said we were—what?"

He had to laugh as they paused beside a pillar. "Goddamn," he said. "Wasn't that something?"

"What?"

"People are funny all right. So help me—I don't understand them. You know what she said Rosalie? This'll kill you. She said, 'You two are Jewish people, aren't you?'"

"What?"

"Yes. Can you beat that? As if that explained everything."

"And you let her get away with it?"

"Aw," he said. "Get away with it. What could I do? There was nothing I could do except ignore her."

"Ignore her?" cried Rosalie. "I would've scratched her eyes out."

"Oh, no," he said. "And be as bad as she is?"

She stared at him as if he had just been introduced.

"You know," she said. "Sometimes I think there's something wrong with you. What're you smiling about? I mean it. First you quit your job. I never heard of such a crazy thing. Where did you get the nerve to do it? Then all of a sudden you're like a rabbit. You sit there and take it."

"Bravo," he said. "That's a wonderful speech. Shake hands."

"Oh, go away."

"I didn't know you had it in you."

Since the publication of his collection of short stories, *The Common Thread,* in 1944, Michael Seide has enjoyed a growing reputation as one of the best among the small group of serious writers of fiction dealing with Jewish life in the United States. Mr. Seide was born in Brest-Litovsk, Poland, in 1911, came to the United States in 1914, and studied at the College of the City of New York and Columbia University. The story published here is from a novel in progress tentatively entitled *The Man in the Middle.*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"You aggravate me."

"I'll vote for you any time."

"Everything's a joke with you."

"You want tears?"

"No—sense."

"All right, then," he said. "I'll give it to you. Be a good girl. Do yourself a favor. Go upstairs now and take that bus and go home."

"Don't be so anxious to get rid of me."

"How about it? And eat. You'll feel better."

"No. I think I'll just stand right here."

"What?" he said. "What for?"

"Why not?"

"What d'you mean why not? You can't stand here. You have to go home."

"Home," she said. "I hate it. What am I going to do home?"

"Oh, hell," he said. "How do I know? Why do you ask me such questions?"

"Stay with me."

"I can't."

"Don't leave me."

"But I must. I promised the boys, Rosalie. You know that. It's all fixed up. I can't back out now."

"But what about me? I'll go crazy if I have to stay home."

"Then go to the movies or something."

"No. Not alone. You stay. You go with me."

"But I just told you."

"If you go with me, I'll pay for myself."

"I can't."

"I'll even pay for you. How's that?"

"Look," he said. "Who's aggravating who now? Why must we stand here like dopes and talk this way? I swear I'll go nuts myself if you keep this up. What's the matter with you? You know I have to go. Why can't you be nice about it?"

"Okay," she said. "You don't have to yell. Go on. Go. Who's stopping you?"

"*You* are. I can't leave you like this."

"Oh, yes, you can," she said, and her voice trembled. "You can leave me. Don't make believe. I know you now. You don't care what happens to me. What d'you care? You only care about yourself. You're so selfish I hate you. Go ahead. Here's your train. Take it. I don't care. But you'll see. You'll be sorry. You'll see."

The doors opened. The doors closed. The train waited for no one—it went. The next train must be his. If pity was the glue, then he was determined to become unstuck. Still there were his hands crammed in his pockets—he noticed how they ached—they wished to slip themselves inside her coat and cleverly caress the jut and bulge of her—and so defeat him. Yet how could he leave her like this? The mystic lashes of her eyes thinned in retreat, her fever-red lips, the ailing hollows in her cheeks—like millions of her self-neglected kind, she often attained this cruel look of sickliness—for by herself what was she behind her rosy skin but scattered and plain—and lonely—and loneliness was to her that cold rumpled horror (an old hag in a crouch, munching the nits she nicks out of her tangled hair) which only love-making—even if it be merely an experiment in the art of holding hands—could assuage and chase away. Somewhere there must be someone who can remain alone for one single night without once shivering. A man without a neck stepped on the scales, and with the use of an ordinary penny, profited to the extent of a double-take: he was shocked to learn how much of a burden he really was to those who really loved him.

"Rosalie—look at me. I said look at me. Why don't you stop making up things and let me go? Why do you want to be so terrible?"

"Because *you* are. Because you don't love me any more."

"Don't be silly."

"You don't. Don't you think I can tell?"

"Wait a minute," he said. "Are you going to cry?"

"Don't worry. I can tell. I know."

"Because if you are— I won't stand for it."

"You're running away from me."

"Running away from you? That settles it. You don't know what you're talking about any more. Rosalie, I'm asking you. For the last time—are you going home or not?"

"Don't bother me. I told you."

"I hear a train coming."

"I'm not going."

"I'm taking it, Rosalie."

"Take it. I'm staying right here."

"I see," he said. "So that's final eh?"

"That's final."

"Okay, baby. You win. Stay here and look foolish. Have a good time. And look me up when you're a little older. I might like you then."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

And he wheeled away from her. And he stalked to the edge of the platform. And the train blew dust in his eyes. So he called it a dirty name. But the ragged clod of his fury was like an artificial flower, rootless, theatrical in color, brittle as any false stem in its lurid resemblance to the true and traditional green of a thing growing—so it cracked just as the door hissed behind him. The weakling—he would not clutch at strap or pole—but had to turn and give his love the satisfaction of a last look as the train carried him away. Her ankles were insolently crossed where she leaned. If she had stuck out her tongue at him, he would have smiled. But even the set of her head which moved in following his flight seemed fixed in a death-like immobility—and her clearest eye was like an icicle—and she returned his stare of pity and anxiety with no sign that she would ever relent, go home, see him again on Monday. He did not care what she thought it meant—he shook his fist at her.

Foolish and hard-boiled to the last—with her empty belly dead set against the bread-box—did she cry a little after all? And cough? Her late cold had left her with a cough. And spit a bit? Then powder the pock-mark on the side of her nose? This is how the earth turns so magnificently for him who is merely so-sorry-dear, who sniffs while he circles around—though he be miles away—the Rosalie to whom in his bungling he has given a bum steer—and the heartless and cuckoo so-long of his fist in her face.

So he rides, and then he walks, and even talks—to himself—very much alive. But of his journey he remembers nothing, for the next thing he knows he is running up the stairs to the second floor of the four-story building where he lives in apartment 7B in that laughable borough of Brooklyn—God knows why.

He began to take the stone steps two at a time, then tried for three, fickle to all else but speed. His final leap on his landing almost bowled the freckle-face over.

"Jesus," he cried. "I didn't hurt you, did I?"

He held her a moment while she shook her head with the extravagant wobble of four years going on five.

"See," she said, showing him what she held in her hand.

"A ball," he said. "Say—that looks like a good one."

"Afraid not," she said. "It doesn't bounce."

Sadly she handed it over for him to see. She was the odd little number from next door who was not to be treated like a toy, or tossed in the air and tickled. Thelma was her name—it made everyone lisp. The startling maturity of her mouth might suggest that she already knew the score, but no, how could that be? She was far too tiny for that with her toothpick legs, and her half-grown teeth haphazardly spaced, and her one treasure, her elliptical eyes of green—which never blinked. But she was no monster. She had her own troubles.

"Hell," he said. "It has a hole in it. That's why."

"I know," she said. "My father washed it. He found it. I'm lucky to have my own ball. Can you paste it? I'm sick a whole week."

"What?" he said. "Not because of this?"

"No, here," she said. "In my throat."

"Oh. That's too bad. I'm sorry to hear that."

"Yes. And now my father. You know why?"

"He must've caught it from you."

"Oh, no," she said. "He tells lies. My mother says so. She yells to him get out of the house. He's a good man, but he sleeps."

"What's wrong with that? Don't tell me—I know."

He reached down to smooth her hair of many colors. Her skull felt as crushable as her own bleached ball with the bad hole in it.

"But he does," she said. "You know my gramma? She gives him money."

"Look, Thelma. That's very nice. I'm glad to hear it. But you musn't tell these things."

"Why?"

"If your father knew, he'd be very angry."

"Why? Is it wrong?"

"Don't act so innocent," he said. "I don't know if it's so wrong—but it's not exactly right either. I'll explain it to you sometime. Just don't tell."

"I shouldn't?"

"Believe me, it's better that way."

"But I like to tell you. It's a secret."

"Oh. Well, all right, then. If you have to tell somebody. But nobody else. Understand?"

"Yes."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Good girl."

"So you can paste it?"

"This thing? Naa. Take it away. I tell you what. Let's see how much I got. Will you do me a favor?"

"What?"

"Here's fifteen cents. Go down and buy a high bouncer."

"No."

"Don't tell me no."

"My mother says never to take."

"Wait a minute," he said. "I'm not giving you anything. I want you to buy it for me. For me—understand?"

"Oh."

"Oh, is right. So take. Now don't cross the street. Go on the corner."

"I will."

"And listen. If you want to, you can stay down and play with it."

"I can?"

"Sure. I wouldn't trust anybody else. But you can hold it for me. All right?"

"Oh, yes," she said. "Can I stay long? Can I stay long?"

"As long as you like. Only I'll break your head if you go in the gutter. And remember—that ball's mine. When I ask you for it, will you give it to me?"

"I will, I will."

"Good," he said. "So that's settled."

She began to hop up and down, clinging to him.

"Oh, boy," she piped. "You know what?"

"What?"

"I love you, I love you."

"Naturally," he said. "Go on now—scram."

WHEN the boy scout entered the house, he found two of his nearest and dearest (he wanted to feel affectionate—go do him something) not in the kitchen which was seriously so small it could be put in a pocket, but in the living room which had more space for spoofing—his sister, Helen, seated on her legs like a chink on the couch, his mother, Mamma, on her feet as usual, with the teapot with the broken spout for watering the plants in her hand, both frowning at this emissary of the devil because he had barged in with such a bang.

Questioners, if left alone, they inevitably slid back again to relive certain sad moments of the past, refusing to forget how once they had been humiliated, be it by dearth or death, forever baffled by the most ordinary fact that life, that straight and lovely, could by a sudden twist become cracked and crooked, but they never cried, stubborn, ashamed to be pursuing this silliness but determined to make it say uncle, which it never did because someone was always breathing too loud, and they were disturbed, and still there was no answer. A family failing. On which he had lately begun to slam the door. Against their brooding, he pitted his rudeness, the virtue of his noise. For by this time it ought to be clear to everyone concerned that dreamy peace and dreamy quiet can never flourish in the four rented boxes of a home where the collective spirit is tempted to droop like a bedraggled mop left to lean head down in a dusty corner. So lights, camera—shoot it. He stiffened into the angular salute of a wooden soldier. Then hurled his hat at Helen's head—and was delighted to see it stick there.

"Hey," he cried. "Did you see that?"

Helen had to smile.

"Thanks," she said. "That's just what I need for my headache."

"Did you see that, Ma?" he crowed. "Did you see how I did it?" he snapped his fingers. "Just like that."

"Tricks," said Mrs. Bellinson.

"You said it. Hey, don't take it off yet. Doesn't she look cute? Come on, Ma—you try it. I bet you can do it too."

Mrs. Bellinson shook her head hopelessly.

"Still a child," she said. "He compares himself to me."

"Try it, try it."

"No," she said. "Not with my old hands."

"Ah, yes—your old hands."

He threw his coat like a bundle on the farthest chair.

"You're young," he cried. "Like a spring chicken. Don't you think I know? You're strong, I tell you. Like iron."

"Sure, sure," Mrs. Bellinson sighed.

"Look," said Helen. "You may not know it—but there's a closet in this house."

"Is there?" he said. "How nice. So?"

"So go hang your coat up."

"Later," he said. "There are more important things to do."

For one thing, to do what was never done in this house except on some high and solemn holiday, to kiss his mother as his mother (and not as his foremost and most eloquent advocate before God) with good

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

instinct, with honesty, and with pleasure—but it was difficult, for she saw it coming, and he had to be clever to catch her clean and bloodless cheek—hold still, Mamma—but she kept struggling, making a face as if he had poisoned her, and ploop—a gulp of water came out of the teapot to splash him.

"Fool," she cried. "Look what you made me do."

"Holy mackerel," he said, releasing her. "What happened?"

"Ach," said Mrs. Bellinson. "To be so crazy."

"I'm all wet."

"Good for you," Helen laughed.

"This is lovely," he said. "Look at me. My number two pants."

"Your number two?" said Mrs. Bellinson. "Quick. Take it off. I'll press it."

"No, Ma," said Helen. "Don't you do it. Next time he won't get so fresh."

"Fresh?" he said.

"Stupid," said Mrs. Bellinson. "You hear me? Come. You'll catch cold."

"You," he said. "You know what I'm going to do, Mrs. Bellinson? I'm going to sue you."

"Sue me, don't sue me."

"You're a holy terror."

"Go change."

"Why did you push me?"

"He stands there," said Mrs. Bellinson. "You see? He'll get sick."

"Don't worry," he smiled. "I don't get sick so fast."

"And then who will suffer? Me—of course."

"Uh-uh," he said. "Did you hear that, Helen? There goes that word again. We ought to fine her a nickel every time she uses it."

"A dime," said Helen.

"What is this suffer?" he said. "Why do you love that word so much?"

Mrs. Bellinson raised the teapot threateningly.

"Don't touch me," she said. "I'll spill you from head to foot."

"Now, now," he said. "Be a good kid."

"American children—they make fun of me."

"Fun of you? Oh, no, Mamma. Just the opposite. There's no one like you in the whole world. Don't you know that? Shake hands."

"Oh, no," she said, "not today."

"She doesn't trust me." He laughed. "She's right. That's the trouble—she's always right. Where's Abe? Did he come in yet?"

"No," said Helen. "What did he say, Ma? Is he coming home?"

"Is he coming home," said Mrs. Bellinson. "Another one. He comes and he goes. Does he ever say?"

"He'll be home," said Helen. "What time is it, Joe?"

"I don't know," he said. "Jesus—I'm suddenly pooped. Move over and let me sit down."

STRANGE how he had almost forgotten he had a definite thing he just *had* to tell them. He stretched himself out with a sigh beside his wide-awake sister, murmuring a sibilation on sleep—how sweet it would be—to slip into sleep. She smiled to see how loosely he surrendered to his sudden weariness, then placed his hat over his face, making it nice and dim for him. What would be the very safest way? Still he rested in that hazy in between of the before and after, thinking was there a slice of store cheesecake left in the house, or a lone bakery doughnut, powdered, or a book perhaps which could tell him how to eat (and not sleep) his way through an italicized event in the history of this, which was no different from any other, family. Or an onion roll. His feet—they were killing him. He closed his eyes entirely. They asked him frankly if he was dead, and receiving no answer, ignored him as if he were, turning to some other subject unsuspectingly. No, there was no good way of telling them—none—not one which could have mercy on their present without panic, on their tolerable now of canary-yellow curtains for the sole kitchen window—or on their higher chit-chat about Skulnick, that apostate of a cousin.

He was going to marry that girl. It was a scandal. Samuel Skulnick at thirty-four, a gloomy foreign-born boy, had called his mother an old bitch for the purple curse with which she had lambasted his love a little too obviously a natural blond, and had told her in her own mixed language that she could go and stand on her head if she thought it would help, but as for him, he was going to listen to the knock-knock of his heart however it may disgracefully mislead him. To his father also he had raised his hand. And

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

had chased the both of them out of his dusty and failing dry-goods store. Shocked by this side of the story, as women who had always been meek before the choleric god of their forefathers, Mamma and Helen could not understand how Skulnick could be so terrible. But was he really? Joe did not think so —and so he would tell them in a minute. Love is love in any religion. God says so. God is nice.

HELEN tipped his hat off his face with an excited elbow.

"That's it," she said. "That's just it. I've been thinking about it. Suppose they do have children, Mamma? What then?"

"More cousins," Joe mumbled, struggling to sit up straight.

"Then?" said Mrs. Bellinson. "Then the real trouble will begin."

"You said it," Joe smiled. "Especially if they're all girls."

"Wiseguy," said Helen. "Where did you come from?"

"I've been here," he said. "I've been listening."

"Aie," Mrs. Bellinson said mournfully. "An only son. And always such a devoted one."

"Sit down, Mamma," he said. "Why is it you never sit down? Have you made a bet with someone?"

"And now so mean. How will they live without him? Both so sick and old. Who will support them now?"

"That's easy," he said. "Hate will do it, Mamma."

"Hate?" said Helen.

"Sure," he said. "They will hate him—and they will hate her. And they'll grow fat on it. If you ask me, I think they're both silly."

"Well," said Helen. "Just like that, eh? What're you trying to say? That you're on his side?"

"No," he said. "I didn't say that. I'm on nobody's side. But I like Skulnick. There's something about him that I like."

"What, for example?"

"Oh, hell," he said. "I *am* on his side. Here's a guy who wants to live his own life—and right away everybody tries to stop him."

"Please," said Helen. "Whatever you do —don't yell. Live his own life. Sure. Who says no? But that's not the point at all—is it, Mamma? What that fool wants to do is wrong. You don't think it's right, do you?"

"Me?" he said. "I told you. It doesn't matter what I think. All I know is that if Skulnick wants to marry a *shiksa,* that's his business. What does she look like? Does anybody know? The guy has a perfect right to do whatever he wants."

"Ah," said Helen. "Now there is where I don't agree with you at all. What d'you mean do whatever he wants?"

"Why not?"

"No, sir. I'm sorry. That's kid stuff."

"I beg your pardon," he said.

"Nobody's *that* free."

"Are you calling me a kid?"

"I'm not calling you anything. We're not talking about you, are we? Though it wouldn't hurt you if you were a little older."

"Like you?"

"Then you'd know. Then you'd find out that you just can't go around doing whatever you want without considering other people."

"Is that so?" he said.

She suddenly laughed—then tapped him once on the back of his head.

"Look at him," she said. "He's angry."

"Don't be silly," he said, ducking as if he expected to be tapped again. "Why should I be angry? Only I would like to know one thing. Why is it you still think I'm a baby or something? Mamma too. All right. Maybe Skulnick is a fool. But at least he's doing what he wants to do. And for that I must say I admire him. That's just the way it should be. If you want to do something, and you think it's right, you go ahead and do it—without asking anybody."

Helen was amused.

"You know," she said. "I've heard you talk this way before. And you know what I think? I think you're talking through your hat. Sure—of course. It's easy to have nerve for someone else. But let me tell you—I bet you would never do what Skulnick is doing —or anything like it."

"You don't think so, eh?"

"No, sir. I *know* you wouldn't."

"In that case," he said, and stopped.

He was smiling queerly.

"In that case, what?" she challenged. "Go ahead—say it."

"In that case, you're in for a shock."

"Am I?"

"I'm afraid so. I quit my job today."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"You what?" She stared at him, her face and neck at once terrifically red. "Now look here, Joe. If you're kidding me, I'll kill you."

"Oh, no," he said. "I mean it. Today. Just like that. You see?"

"You're crazy," she said. "Mamma, did you hear? He's crazy."

"Okay," he said. "Maybe I am. But next time—"

"Shut up," she cried. "Shut up. Don't you talk to me."

She snatched up the *Daily News* and ran directly into the bathroom and made the house shake as she locked herself in with a crash, but certainly not for the purpose of poring over the pictures of a triple collision of cars or of a double suicide, but to think it over, to say Jesus, to slap herself—and try to be reasonable, and push down the bitter pill he had suddenly given her to swallow.

"My God," he said. "That's the first thing she always does. She gets excited."

Mrs. Bellinson appeared to be looking for something behind her, then as if she had found it, slowly sat down on the tip of a hard chair, and cradling the teapot in her lap, tried very quietly to digest this latest disaster.

"I don't know what's the matter with her," he said. "Right away she tells you to shut up. You can never talk to her."

He was the baby of the family. And they remembered him from the days of the diaper when his squalling meant that he had a will, but not as yet a mind of his own—though later they were quick on the trigger when it came to defending him as not the freshest, but the cleverest kid on the block, but a kid, a darling, but a kid—how wonderful if he would always remain that way. And now—look how he had piped up now.

But one look at Mamma—and oo—it would be the worst moment today for this jaunty anarchist, this composer of juvenile ultimatums. Good for him. Whatever serves to smack a little sense into anyone who is too cocksure—is good for him. He had to apply the preventive exercise of taking a deep breath and swallowing, else he would have, well, acted just like a sissy. Because it was not fair. Because she refused to become furious. Because she did not tear her hair—or make a motion to tear him. How unlucky to have a mother who was so different, who was so old-fashioned (full of the stern and monumental dignity of the imported brand) as to be submissive and discreet, and if sorrowful, then sorrowful as one who suffers with and for—never alone. What is to be done with her? She is such a poor American—though she has been told that America is hers also—such a mild citizen, acknowledging the police, but considered queer because she will not, like the others, allow herself to become mussed in grabbing for gold—another socialist—or any other article lying around loose.

Fair were the fields of the farm in Poland where she was born and where she ran around like a peppy little peasant in a smock among the chickies. And then a man came and married her. Talmudic, but with town ideas, and exactly of the same height. The old couple danced—but as promptly fell into a frenzy of lamentation when the new man said he must take her away. Live with us, cried the old couple. But he took her to Brooklyn—God knows why. The letters crossed the ocean in bunches. What are rooms to the back? And a soda of ice-cream? And a combination sink and washtub? And trains high in the street? Come back, the old couple cried. Mamma wept at night. But Papa rushed into business with a crony who cheated him. Who remembers him now?

Not a move out of her. Nothing. Not a single move.

Did she remember that winter? Was she thinking of it now? Winter of the creepy episode in the sky. They were living then on Sutter Avenue, in the ancient and bubbling neighborhood of Brownsville, in a two-family house of rat-infested wood stuccoed the year before, when again there was a banging on the door to pay more rent, but the man was mad, always trying as he did to get blood out of a stone. His name was Edelstein, and he was the landlord, and he lived beneath them on his palatial first floor, while beneath him substantially, was his shoe store. Mamma was bewildered, she pitied him, but Papa (his chest had temporarily caved in) was a terrible patient—he was hopeless—he wanted to kill. That a man should so torment them in these poor and broken years. It was really the limit. Even tubby Mrs. Edelstein thought so as she pleaded with her hulk of a husband. Jacob,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

she cried, what are you doing? I am ashamed. The whole block knows. What is money? Poison when you got too much. Put a radiator in one bedroom at least. They'll pay you later. Think of God, Jacob, think. She used to sneak upstairs, the asthmatic appeaser, with something hot in a small aluminum pot hidden under her apron, some tasty peace offering cooked on gas, for she had a gas stove downstairs, but it choked her. Leery of her conglomeration of her comparative luxury, tears scalded her eyes as she tried to tell them. Flour for *chalah*? I have flour for raisin cookies too. I mean it. I have a new kitchen set. Bamboo—come and see sometimes. I have steam. I have electric lights. What else? But do I enjoy it? To the devil it belongs. How can I enjoy it when mine Jacob makes you live like this? Mrs. Bellinson, you are so good. Have pity on me. Move. You will die here this winter. Please. Jacob will give you the money for it. I promise you. I'll tear it from him. Move. Mamma tried to soothe her. But Papa turned to the wall.

Later the city relief sent them a ton of coal. One middle of the night, Abie was the first to smell the smoke, and shook them without screaming, and they helped Papa to the fire escape, and they all scrambled to the roof to save themselves in their shameful underwear. The burning old stock in the cellar certainly made a stink. When a fireman with an axe in his hand climbed in to look for the Edelsteins, he found no one, for no one had slept at home. That did not smell so good either. Really, it was the limit. Murderers, cried Papa.

THE three little Bellinsons were uselessly little, of lower-grade dependency, joyously erupting in the street, sullenly subsiding in the house, except for Helen with her chin-trembling, her floor-scrubbing compassion, and her mother-mimicking gentility. But she was also highly critical of the family crisis, so she too would snarl and hit back. It was extraordinary how often the kids tried to cripple each other that winter, and how difficult they were to pluck apart. Abie and Joey were a pair. Abe said Joey should do it. And Joey said Abie should do it. And so of course neither of them did it much in the beginning. But one time they came upon Mamma gasping horribly as she lugged up that daily pail of coal, and that decided them—they used the secret handshake—they would alternate. Coal is black enough but what can equal the pure sunlessness of hate below the age of double figures? At first Edelstein suffered the little children to struggle for it with both hands through the cellar in the street (everybody sees us, Mamma, everybody), but then one day he padlocked the iron door, changing the route of their humiliation, and they had to stagger through the trapdoor in the store, spilling lumps on the polished floor, and it was so much longer to carry, and there were strangers now to pity them, properly seated customers, some of whom looked away and coughed, while others simply stared, startled sight-seers all, with one shoe on and one shoe off. The arrogance of boys who are underfed—they are positive that no one can match the puff of their pride, or the pathos of their susceptibility, or the glamour of their wounds. They are so tensile and thin, given to delicious fits of supernatural shivering.

Lord, the excitement, the excitement. They waited for it at the living room windows, peering through poorly-smoked bits of milk-bottle glass. My heart is in my mouth, said Joey, huddling up to her. Mamma smiled and tried to fold him in a wing of her shawl and said to swallow it, little fool, but she too was strangely moved. The long-suffering snow on the rooftops looked frightful. One man alone stood in the middle of the gutter, pointing at the sky, like the moon, utterly losing his manners. Oh, they suddenly cried, crowding together to look, seeing it chewed, expecting an explosion. They gazed in awe at the serene and infamous avidity of the moon. Dark and darker—Mamma, dear, look—and how cold—and how funny, feel it, this eerie loneliness of the heavens which quietly descends on the earth. Joey, little fool, he shuddered as he vainly listened for trumpets. What a bafflement. The sun had not raised a finger. The sun had submitted without a sound.

Was it this then? See the interventionist—he slips back into the present as glibly as he had slipped out—he feels nice. Was it this wisdom then that Mamma had absorbed—the wisdom of the sun when it is totally eclipsed?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"GODDAMN," he appealed to her, holding out his hand. "Another one, Mamma. Look at it."

"What?" she started, responding as he had hoped. "Where?"

"A paper cut. See it? Right between the fingers."

"Ah."

"It hurts like hell."

"Put on iodine."

"I will. You're not mad at me, are you, Mamma?"

"Mad?"

"I hope not."

"No."

"That's good," he said. "I'm glad. Somebody *has* to be my friend."

Mrs. Bellinson smiled at her youngest and most innocent.

"Yes," she said. "I'm your friend. Go, friend—put on some iodine."

"I can't. Helen's in there. I'm hungry, Mamma."

"Ah, yes," she said, "of course. And here I sit."

"Sit, sit. Did I ask you to get up? I can take it myself. Just tell me what."

"No," she said. "You'll never know. Come. You'll wash in the sink."

"Wash?" he said. "What for? All I want to do is eat."

"Eat, sure. But first you wash."

"After."

"First. Come—pig."

He laughed. "Is that what you think of me?"

"Ah," she said. "You better not ask."

She was right. He could see that at once. He better not. Through the strained green-pea soup (he was the *goy* who struck the match to light the gas to warm it), through the quarter of cold chicken which had the white meat and the wing, through slices of tomato and leaves of lettuce salted on the side, through the applesauce and its touch of cinnamon, he said nothing, but sensibly used his mouth for what it was originally intended. He ate heartily. For on this day at least and as yet (it seemed ages since a wrong swallow) satisfaction of hunger had few if any furtive or bitter connotations, but was rather a nice necessity, and a calm experience at the end of which, if there was bliss (and surprise—there was), it was as finely-woven and functional as this twenty-year-old tablecloth with tassels. It was sweet to be crumbling his own bread. Came the tea to wash it all down. He was full. No coffee cake or blueberry jam—he waved it away. He would just sip he said—and smoke like a lord in between.

HELEN came in and sat down opposite him. "Well," she said. "Don't *you* look satisfied. How about you, Mamma? Did you eat yet? I bet not."

"I'll eat," said Mamma. "Don't worry about me. You want soup?"

"No," said Helen. "I'm not too hungry. Some chicken maybe."

"Chicken's on the table."

"Wait. Will you look at that? What's the matter with you, Mamma? Why must you always be washing dishes in the middle of a meal?"

"It saves time."

"Time. It makes noise—that's all it does."

"Foolish. Can it be done without?"

"Please," said Helen. "Don't argue with me. I feel bad enough as it is."

"Ach," said Mamma, "did you ever see? She never lets me do a thing."

"She's right," said Joe. "Come on, kiddo—sit down."

"Sit down," said Mamma. "All right. If it makes you so happy—I'll sit down."

"That's the way to talk," he said. "Throw away that dish towel."

Helen stared at him.

"I must be dreaming," she said. "Did you say I was right?"

He smiled. "It slipped out. But then, when you're right, you're right. Didn't you know? Sometimes you can be very smart. And sometimes—"

"I can be smarter?"

"Oh, no," he laughed. "Just plain dumb. Especially when you lose your temper and tell me to shut up."

"Oh, that," she said. "I'm sorry. I couldn't help it. This chicken's really good, Mamma."

"Good?" said Mamma. "Certainly. Why shouldn't it be? I pay the best prices, don't I?"

"Prices," said Helen. "It's how you cook it. And you know how."

Joe tried to stare at her as she had stared at him.

"I must be dreaming," he said. "Did you say you were sorry?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She lowered her eyes.

"Wiseguy," she said, but had to smile.

How she pleased him at that moment—pleased him so much he had to hide it under cover of fiddling with his cigarette. A sister is a sister. So they say. A sister is a girl—usually—to be treated as such, that is, to be squelched, else she will elevate herself to equality with her brothers, for such is the nature of the female, to be grasping, to be vocal, to be insidious, to dream of power beyond the puissant breath of her perfume. What does the listener say? It may be interesting sometimes to inquire into the sex of the soul. But a sister may be a Helen too—and that too is the crux of it, that too is what makes a man say hooray. True, she still titters like a schoolgirl at the slightest trickle of blood, but she never faints—and some men do. Her boy-friend, Louie, that pipe-smoker with his very fresh city college BA, when first he laid eyes on her at a party, said to himself here now is a compact and sensible entity, then said it to her in these very same big words. When she asked for a translation, please, and promptly received it, she laughed and said that he may touch her—she was real. That was it exactly. He came thereafter to touch her frequently (he was a judicious wanderer, that orphan, who enjoyed the clemency of a lone aunt), to ask her to listen to him theorize, risking her temper as well as her tact, disturbing her more than he realized. The ruthlessness of what men call knowledge, replete with ructions of individuality, with scorn for sacrifice, with declarations too damn dry that consideration for others would ruin her. Then the kissing. It ends in that—it begins with talk—but it ends in that chaste and charming game in which the hands of the contestants (if neither is coy) are never slapped or told to stop it. So it goes healthily on and on—until all at once the most gentle play of lips seem to result in a profound displacement of loyalty. Yet this was hardly more than a wistful complication when compared with that pain common to all people—the pain of partial surrender. Ah, that independent one. She would not be rushed. She would stand up abruptly in the midst of a session to smooth her dress and to fix her hair, and to beg her baffled Louie to go home, darling, go home. For how could she cling to her precious dreams of order, of a world clean and cheerful everywhere, when clinging to him meant clinging to him unto dishevelment? But then she was adorable. She would sit down again.

She raised her knife.

"Our baby," she said. "The hope of the family. Should I kill him now, Mamma?"

"With that?" he scoffed. "Don't be funny."

"Or should I wait?"

"You better get something sharper."

"It'll do. God. Isn't it going to be beautiful from now on? How are you on polishing apples, Mamma?"

"Excellent," he said. "I can recommend her."

"You can?" she said. "Well, that's good. Tell me now. Is it true? Or is it just a rumor?"

"What?"

"I've heard you're going to dust off your fiddle and play in the backyards."

"Me?" he laughed. "Oh, no—how can I? All the strings are busted."

She sighed—then shook her head.

"There it is," she said. "That's just what I can't understand."

"What?" he said. "What is it now? Honest, Ma, I can't keep up with her."

"The way you can laugh."

"Oh, that," he suddenly frowned. "I know what you're thinking."

"You must have *something* up your sleeve. What is it? Is it another job?"

"No," he glanced away distastefully. "There's no other job."

"Then what are you doing? Do you know what you're doing?"

"Of course I do," he said angrily. "Are you going to talk to me like all the rest? I thought you were different."

"What?" she said. "You too?"

"What d'you mean—you too?"

"That's all I've been hearing lately—I'm different. You must've been talking to Lou. You know what I do every time he leaves me? I look myself over very carefully to see if I have four eyes or six legs or something. I mean it—when he gets on that subject, he scares me. Different. I'm beginning to hate that word. You know what I think? I think that all the trouble in the world is caused by people who are different. I mean by those who *think* they are."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Now wait a minute," he said. "Don't look at *me* like that."

"You," she said. "I'm afraid you're another."

"Oh, no, Helen—you're wrong."

"You're twisted too."

"You're *way* off the track."

"All twisted up. Like me. Right now. But at least I admit it."

"Ye gods," he said. "Are you listening, Ma? Maybe you can straighten us out. What're we talking about?"

"Yes," said Helen. "What? It's a good question. That's the way it's become in this family. We talk and we talk. But do we ever say anything? You're right. We used to understand each other. But now? My name's Helen. What's yours?"

"Mine is stinky. Who cares? This is really very nice. What's been happening? I've never heard *you* sound so sad."

"There comes a time, sonny. You'll find out. You begin to have reasons."

"Reasons," he said. "What reasons?"

"I'll write you a letter."

"You mean my quitting?"

"Don't do it, Joe."

"Don't do it?"

"Listen to me."

"But I've already done it."

"Then back out of it somehow."

"I can't."

"You can—I know you can."

The door slammed—but no one heard it.

"Holy mackerel," he cried. "Why are you bothering me? You know it's done—and that's all there is to it."

"What's done?" said Abe. "What the hell's going on here?"

His intrusion was elaborately casual. His softened hat was shoved back on his head. The short dead end of a butt was stuck to his lip. His slouch was the lean and relaxed (but contemptuous) slouch of a hoodlum gracefully leaning in a darkened doorway. His big and candid eyes of a baby could easily blaze. Tough, the guy was tough, clever with a cue stick, had a highly educated left, threw a hard ball, had speed to burn, could roll them bones. Who did he think he was trying to fool? No one but himself, of course.

"Ah," said Helen, "wait until you hear. You'll like this. Go on—ask him. You talk to him. I can't any more."

"She can't," said Joe. "Don't worry—she's been doing all right so far."

"See it?" said Helen. "He's just like that wall."

"Hello, Ma," said Abe. "Are you in this too?"

"Just like that wall," said Joe. "That's a hot one."

"Well?" said Helen. "He's waiting. Why don't you tell him?"

"I'll tell him," said Joe. "Don't rush me. I'll tell him."

Abe flipped his butt into the open garbage pail.

"This sounds very important," he said. "Or is it?"

"Oh, it's important, all right," said Helen. "He's quit his job. How d'you like that?"

"Uh-uh," said Abe.

"Isn't that beautiful?"

"Well, what d'you know," said Abe mockingly. "What happened?"

"Nothing," said Joe, blushing like a fool.

"Nothing?"

"Nothing at all. I just quit."

"You just quit, eh?"

"Today. I gave notice. That's all."

"Aha," said Abe. "I see. And how do you feel otherwise?"

"All right," Joe quavered, looking directly at him. "I mean it. I'm all right, Abe. I really am. I mean it."

But oh, the rascal, he said so much more with his eyes, and said it so much more eloquently, that Abe could not resist it—had to believe him at once.

"Okay, then," he said quietly. "That's all I wanted to know. Is that all there is? Can I go now?"

"What?" said Helen. "What's going on here? You mean to say you're going to let him get away with it?"

"Get away with what?" said Abe, glaring at her. "Do you know? If you don't, then leave him alone."

"Leave him alone?"

"He knows what he's doing."

"Knows what he's doing?"

"I do," cried Joe, jumping up, "I do."

So out and around them, having almost turned the table over, he threads his way, with his enlarged and plaintive eyes and his sad elongated neck (feeling changed again—though again nothing had been settled), act-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ing gay, crying out gangway, his next stop the bathroom which is so everyday, certainly, yet there is where fresh spunk is magically generated. He claimed he had to get clean. The boys would soon be coming.

Having traveled this far, must he travel further? Naked in a cloud of steam, he dipped his toes in the tub of water, a torment, terrifically hot the way he liked it. Not for a while—please. At last he stood in it, then sank to his knees, and holding on, began to settle backwards slowly, and shut his eyes, and floated, and allowed himself to faint a little—who could see? O go—go away from me. Softly in a whirl, as a god in his ascension, puckering, white as camay soap the weariness, and crinkly blue the towel of the sky, plucking at a single string, piercing music, the water troubled, the trouble below, the trouble. O what is this grief? A bubble, it rises out of the ancestral mist, and when it breaks, the heart breaks with it. Will it be so in paradise too? Nonsense—take fifteen cents. For the sea has no shore. And in it death is soundlessly cascading. O day of deliverance—day of uneasy elation. Is anyone standing? Please sit down. His head rolled to one side. His mind fell, and in falling, heard a bell languorously clang-a-langing. See the joy in his sleeper's smile. O lady of hour-glass enticement with her pink successive faces and her admirable flounce. Her wrist tinkled as she waved. With a slight bounce of her curious breasts, body heat of her mouth in tidal engulfment, with a whisper of her name, and of all her names, consenting, she crept upon him slyly, and slowly raised her skirt.

THE LOOK

BABETTE DEUTSCH

Beneath the gay bandeau the shaven head
Showed. The eyes, huger in the wasted face,
Wandered like wild things dulled by narrow pacing.
The hand was tethered to a pain, that fed
On a spreading horror. Light revived the pain,
Reminding it how it had gorged before;
While off the brightness of the corridor
Some rooms were dark now where the dead had lain.
Talk fluttered heavily toward the neighbor bed,
In vain, moved toward the pain again, then tried
Circling some public topic, turned and eyed
The heart's homeliest charges, and fell dead.
The living stood beside the bed and waited
For nothing in the nowhere of appall,
And smiled at her, as if there were no wall
Between them and the dying. Her fate
Stood near them with eyes larger than her own,
That would not close, not even when she slept.
Its look followed after as they lightly crept
Off, waving, leaving her alone.

Babette Deutsch has published several volumes of poetry, as well as criticism, novels, and juvenile books; she has also done outstanding work as a translator of poetry. She lectures at Columbia University on modern poetry, and is at work on a book on that subject. Miss Deutsch was born in New York City and is a graduate of Barnard College.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

JUDEO-EUROPEAN LITERARY MISCELLANY

A Report on Post-War Cultural Activity

DAVID SCHEINERT

Most people in Western Europe are haunted by the double nightmare of war and money. They have neither the peace of mind nor, often, the means necessary to buy a book or picture and quietly enjoy it. Artists, whose position is doubly vulnerable, nevertheless continue to fight for their right to create and to eat. Jewish art, too, keeps up the struggle.

A Yiddish puppet show, "Hakl-Bakl," is much talked about in Paris. Its program consists of "David and Goliath," "With Mazl" (folk sketches), and "Bontchik the Silent" (after Peretz). Jews and non-Jews are enthusiastic about a show that manages to put itself across despite the most difficult material circumstances. The poet Guillevic had this to say in *Les Lettres Françaises:* "Ordinary puppets of the *guignol* type, of a very artful simplicity; no scenery, shifting lights. . . . The producer is Mr. Simche Schwartz. He does everything: sweeps the theater, sets up the stage, writes the lines, composes the music, designs the puppets, makes them, manipulates two in the show—and his enthusiasm is boundless."

Jaap Soetendorp, former editor of the *Nieuw Israelitisch Weekblad* of Amsterdam and at present its Palestinian correspondent, has just published a book entitled *Rebirth of a State (Een Staat herrijst,* Joachimsthal's Boekhandel). An apologistic report on life in Palestine at the moment when the decision for partition was taken, it never says more than the right things. Its merits are: a first-hand account, citing concrete examples, of the aid furnished the Arabs by the English; the history it gives us of the little fishing village of Michmoreth; and the story of a bus trip from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem at a time when such trips might very well have been one-way. The rest is merely fifteen minutes' worth of newsreel shorts with a good deal too much emotional commentary. The eternal song about the necessity of learning Hebrew, a few superficial lines on the Habimah and Ohel theaters, a pious benediction on Tel Aviv, the children's villages, and the kvutzot. . . . But one still looks for something else. Let some writer for once give us an aesthetic "truth about Palestine" or an analysis of its deeper reality. In this regard, the photographs in Mr. Soetendorp's book have more meaning than its text.

One does not mean to blame the author—he seems a credulous and simple sort—for not having opinions, for being touched by everything, for finding everything fine and dandy, for clapping his hands in delight like a child before a new toy. That's his function: to write books of practical, healthy propaganda that will gain support and sympathy for Israel and win over those Jews who may still be hesitating. A more serious matter, however, is the way in which this systematic note of approval and tenderness wears away the rough surface of reality and eliminates most of the shadows, returning us to a period of hazy notions and expurgated publications. The State of Israel is a fact and the Hebrews aren't children.

The Parisian painter Krol has begun a series of twelve large painted cloths on Biblical subjects. The reproduction in dry-point of the first, "The Sacrifice of Abraham," bears witness to a vigorous feeling for decoration more and more stripped of inessentials. I had already taken note of this tendency toward purity in Krol's earlier "Descent from the Cross," also in dry-point: the vertical arm alone of the cross is visible; to the naked indifference of the bodies is opposed a horizon of factory chimneys,

---

David Scheinert was born in Poland in 1916 and was brought to Belgium as a boy. He has achieved a considerable reputation as a writer, and has been active in the Zionist movement. After fighting with the French underground in the late war, he returned to Belgium, where he now lives. This article was translated from the French by Martin Greenberg.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

cranes, and pylons; the robust and placid limbs indicate neither revolt nor defeat, but disdain.

THE level of Jewish culture in Belgium is characterized by the contents of a magazine in French directed and edited by a German Jew. A lady contributor cries out, in its pages, on the imperfection of all things human, adducing as examples the "Victory of Samothrace," lacking a head, and the "Venus of Milo," without arms. The editor replies in all earnestness that time was the author of these infirmities.

While Mr. René Golstein, a distinguished author whose entrails were not shaken by Auschwitz, writes poems of disillusionment whose wan formality could use some Jewish vitamins, the self-styled "satirical" weekly *Pourquoi Pas?* (which enjoys a large circulation), vaguely liberal but energetically chauvinist, continues, *mezzo voce,* its anti-Semitic campaign, and its Catholic confrère, *Septembre,* is not far off in tone from the vulgarity and brutality of the pre-war fascist sheets.

Elian-J. Finbert, to whom I devoted a few words in my preceding article ("Jewish Culture in Western Europe," March 1949), has just put out a 693-page book, *Hautes Terres* (Albin Michel, Paris). Mr. Finbert is a very curious person. At a time when all must choose, when taking sides has become the law of the land, he manages to be at the same time an admirer of Beigin, a Communist, and a kind of Bedouin, all the while still maintaining his contacts with other ideological sectors.

Hautes Terres provides the explanation of this mystery. Its author describes the life he led as a shepherd during the war, when to escape the Germans he grew himself a beard and hid out in the mountains of Provence. There, isolated from the outside world, for months on end he did nothing but tend his flocks. What he has to tell us about this makes up the most interesting, the most "active" part of the book, and indeed constitutes one-half of it. The other half is given over to lyrical effusions that eventually become very tiring. To talk, as did one French critic, of the "humanism of labor" in connection with this book, is to ask us to believe that the moon is made of green cheese. Finbert doesn't think. He sings, and often he even purrs; he enjoys hearing himself talk. To be sure, the language of these lyrical bits is admirable, displaying a perfect command of the written word. But they are nothing more than an interminable succession of variations on the single theme of solidarity with the whole of the universe. In the end one begins to understand Mr. Finbert's omnipresence (which has, moreover, very practical advantages). He is all things and everything: lizard, sheep, sand, cloud, trout, grass, potato, grape, chamois, marble, and spinach. Thus he has no difficulty in being a Bedouin too, a "son of the desert" indeed, but also a son of the Arabian desert. One is surprised, however, that he is not once, in all this big book, a Jew. But perhaps *that* is less a question of literature than of expediency. . . .

The French poet Max Jacob, a convert to Catholicism, passed the last fifteen years of his life at Saint-Benoit-sur-Loire. There, during the war, the Gestapo found him and he died some time afterwards in the camp at Drancy. (The holy water could not save him from the Star of David.) On March 6 last, the French radio broadcast a report of the "official" interment of the author of *Cornet à Dés.* The announcer interviewed the parish priest, several inhabitants of Saint-Benoit, and, lastly, Max's old landlady, the one who had been present at his arrest. The announcer described her statement as "inexact," "incomplete," and "unfair," at the same time acknowledging that it was also "affecting." I expected the worst. The converted Jew, had he in turn converted his landlady to anti-Semitism? In a broken voice, she said simply: "I should have given him a quilt. He wouldn't have caught cold. I felt bad about it afterwards. But the Germans said, 'He'll be back. . . .' When they came looking for him, I ran to tell Monsieur le Curé. *He didn't put himself out about it.* I said to M. Jacob: 'That was worth all those Ways of the Cross you went, wasn't it? . . .'" That's all. We won't soon forget her, the old Frenchwoman of Saint-Benoit-sur-Loire who was Max Jacob's landlady.

It is, of course, somewhat embarrassing to talk about myself in this short survey of the latest Jewish cultural happenings in Western Europe. My novel, *L'Apprentissage Inutile,* published in August 1948 by Corrêa, is the first actual attempt since the war to re-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

create, on the level of art, the last quarter-century of our European existence, the miseries of the German occupation included.

The story turns about Daniel Burger, who is born, makes love, writes bad books, spies on himself, spies on others, and is arrested by the Gestapo while writing his autobiography. Around him are Jews, in a sterile agitation; farther off, mankind, shut up in a prison of its own building, and which itself contains the ghetto of Israel. Everything spins in a void. All rattle their chains and imagine that their concert of noise is dedicated to liberty. The apprenticeship of Daniel Burger, of the Jews, and of humanity is in vain. Nevertheless, the revolt against this futility, though impotent, is a promise of liberation, a hope; the book is not pessimistic in the current sense of the word.

L'Apprentissage Inutile did not go unnoticed. The reception given it by the Jewish, French, Belgian, and Dutch press was often a violent one. Jews, misreading the book, saw in it a classic manifestation of self-hatred. Gentiles saw in Daniel Burger an assimilated Jew who returned to Judaism after the war. They too misread the book. Jews and non-Jews deplored its too crude sexuality: the phallic taboo is still not dead. The indignation expressed by the poet André Spire made me think of his eighty years, and of my hero's twenty-five at the moment of the disaster. It also made me understand that illusions—granting that any remain to us—change with the generations. There were, however, several men who understood that the book was born of despair, of a need to see others, and oneself, clearly, and who endeavored to give ear to its particular accent. If there is a lesson to be got from it, it is one of perpetual discontent, the untiring "quest for the eternal."

I WAS privileged to read in manuscript *Yechoua et Menachem*, the second part of Siegfried E. van Praag's trilogy *Le Pont des Siècles*, the first part of which, *Saül*, appeared about a year ago.

Among the works of Van Praag, *Yechoua et Menachem* is the one to my mind that will provoke the most questions, and perhaps even polemics. And when the author states that this book may offend Jews as well as non-Jews, he is not entirely wrong. For my part I should have wished for a little less respect for and less faithfulness to the Gospels—more irreverence even—in the conception of his Jesus; yet Van Praag's work is far above Sholem Asch's, both artistically and spiritually. It is not this book's bias that will cause an outcry, but rather—paradoxically—its lack of bias, perhaps, its purity, its penetrating melancholy, the serene and flexible way in which it proceeds.

Like his hero Menachem, an imaginary figure—perhaps more alive than his Jesus and at least more sympathetic for me—Van Praag refuses to choose. "To choose means the night." Night everlasting, or herald of the dawn?

Menachem fights the Romans at the side of the Zealot Ben-Necher, killing them as he murmurs "Thou shalt not kill"; he does not share the terrible fate of the other rebels, for there is still other work to be done in Israel. He loves Jesus, but does not believe in him as Jesus would have him believe. He is not a Pharisee, and yet cannot be against the Pharisees. When Pontius Pilate offers the Jews a choice between Barabbas the "robber" and Jesus the "negator of God," he refuses to choose, for Barabbas is not a robber but a Zealot, and Jesus not a negator of God but perhaps a Messiah. ("The Messiah will never come. Messiahs may.") He proposes a third person to be crucified: the one who has made himself the advocate of Rome and of choosing.

The book deserves pages of comment. Let me only say now, however, that, as in his *Saül*, Van Praag has painted Palestine with a simplicity entirely classical, containing nothing unnecessary or barbarous. His Palestine has a palpable mellowness; it can be touched, inhaled, heard on every page. While in certain of the non-Jewish books of this great writer one often has the impression that his heroes sport handlebar mustaches and his heroines straw hats, here one finds oneself outside time, in an eternal Palestine, the Palestine of our hearts.

HAVING recently read the little review *Israelite Studies*, published in Jerusalem under the direction of the poet Joseph Milbauer, I am led to observe that national and social revolutions inevitably call forth a spate, not only of blood, but of "right-minded" literature. What was true of the Soviet Union is now true of Israel. The figure of the vic-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

torious soldier and worker must loom up without shadow or blemish. The contrary would be inconceivable. An emergency situation in the life of a nation or a society can inspire only a literature that is flat and monotonous. When, however, a nation or a society has no more to win or lose, when it begins to shrink and grow wrinkled, then elevations and depressions appear. The objection to be made against this sort of literature is that it is too closely tied to its practical aims; it serves for the moment and then disappears, once what it was written to support is able to grow by itself.

Whereas Soviet writing is not limited to the USSR, the authentic Israelite note can be heard only in Israel. To urge the few months of Israel's existence as against the Soviet quarter-century is no explanation. What damps the ardor of Israelite literature is the intentions of its own creators. Its scope is narrowed by the contrast between what was thought, said, written, and sung during two thousand years of exile, and what is thought, said, written, and sung in Eretz Israel. On the one hand, the ambition, nostalgia, mystery of the weakest of peoples fed by every land and every culture; on the other, the practical but ferocious determination of the Hebrew clan to make of a minuscule territory a paradise shut off from the contagious diseases of the rest of the world. On the one hand, the tart taste of the Jewish flesh and spirit pickled in suffering, subtlety, and revolt; on the other, the unsubtle taste of the Hebrew flesh and spirit when naked and in action. On the one hand, Jewish antennae anxiously stretched toward every corner of the universe, toward God and sensuality at the same time; on the other, fists lacking all nuance, but fists that are creative.

THE Israeli has put a frame around his heaven. The Jew, whether nomad, prisoner, or emancipated, has always had a horror of frames. I don't know whether the Hebrew contemplates the flame of his God in that framed heaven of his, pervaded by the incense of grain. But at all events what he does see in his heaven is the bust of a comrade with breasts swollen with milk, the head of the most diligent worker in the factory, of the liveliest fellow of the kvutza, of the best shot, of the best athlete, of the most untiring dancer of his group.

All the thoughts of the Jew of the Galut converge on Zion. They travel across different worlds, suffer a thousand adventures. But the Hebrew has arrived. The Hebrew is the Jew who has "arrived." He thinks of his stable and his backyard, marvels at and boasts of the quality of his cattle, of Tel Aviv, of the miracle of water, of all the miracles of which he has been and continues to be the artisan. By all means let him succumb a little to *"arrivisme"*; it's a normal phenomenon and it won't last. But it is this disjunction between the *Jew* and the *Hebrew* that narrows the scope of Israeli literature.

The chief task of Israeli artists, and of their writers above all, will, for a long time, be to serve their country. This menial role is not without possibilities of greatness. Although it often subjects one to slavish formulas, to conventions that have to keep to the main point, these are all part of a profession where a valet can change overnight into a king. Only let them be suspicious of all prosperity, of the sugar-coating that forms around boredom, of the "all's well" technique, of the dizziness that also—and above all—threatens the well-balanced.

But if a new kind of work is being born in Israel, our own work, the work of us in the Diaspora, is not finished because of that. As Jewish writers, we shall have to make the necessary corrections to the necessary lies the Hebrew writers tell, we shall have to add vibrations to their blunt and heavy affirmations, prolong the echoes of cries intended only to carry for a few kilometers. The history, both ancient and recent, of our refusals and vicissitudes, of our weakness and obstinacy, is not yet played out. It is important that Jewish writers make it live again, make it speak with an accent that will bring it close, not only to Israel, but also—and above all—to the Gentiles. That Rome, Athens, Numantia, Paris, or Madrid have served as marvelous interpreters to man struggling with his destiny can only spur our ambitions the more. To say that everything has been said about the exceptional greatness of our failure is grotesque. It all waits to be done. If Israel has had a mission on this earth, it is not to preach the good word, but simply to make its word heard, a word issued from its own throat but shaped for every ear, if it be only strong enough.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

FROM THE AMERICAN SCENE

BROWNSVILLE'S AGE OF LEARNING

When the Library Stayed Open All Week

SAMUEL TENENBAUM

BROWNSVILLE, you should know, was originally settled by the overflow of people that spilled out of the tenements and slums of New York's East Side. There they had lived, with innumerable children and innumerable boarders, in railroad flats with the front and the back room sucking up a dim light and the middle rooms dark, with no warm water, no central heating, no bath, and the toilet in the yard. So the East Siders journeyed to this strange remote section of Brooklyn, reached by ferrying across the East River, followed by interminable trolley rides; and later, when a bridge was built across the river, by elevated transit lines at a cost of a nickel.

Here, they thought, they could escape the squalor, the noise, the fetid odors of push-carts laden with foods and flies. Weren't there in Brownsville green fields, and, a little way up, real cows and real farms? And didn't children walk out to these farms with pitchers to buy the milk, fresh as it came from the cow's udders? And didn't the wife buy vegetables in season direct from the farmer? And didn't goats and pigs wander around the fields and streets? And didn't the bread-winner, when he came home from work at eight or nine o'clock at night, after milling for an hour or more in the horribly congested trains, also taste of this new life? For what good wife—after her husband fell into the kitchen chair and tried to keep his eyes open for the evening meal—would not save a glass of that milk for her husband? And didn't that glass of milk, fresh from the cow, hold sufficient strength and goodness in it to overcome the evils of the foul city and the dark, dank factory?

Soon these journeying East Siders made up the largest Jewish community in the world. At one time, Brownsville and its environs numbered two hundred to three hundred thousand Jews (exact figures are impossible to establish), making its Jewish population certainly twice as large as present-day Jerusalem and about one-third that of the new state of Israel.

YET, unhappy to remark, how many noisome features of the East Side slum quickly reappeared in the farmlands of Brownsville! With a world of building space to choose from, speculators erected rows on rows of tenements and jerry-built, identical private houses, all railroad flats, so that light and sun were here, too, rare and precious. As on the East Side, in sweltering heat the citizens sought relief at the candy store, with its "syruped" seltzers, ice cream, and malted milk. Here too were the fire escapes, loaded with bedding out "to air" and in summer also with children and grown-ups. The kitchens, dull, luridly-lighted, were still on public view from the street. In them, one could view the panorama of Brownsville home life: the husband disrobed to the waist, the children com-

SAMUEL TENENBAUM here sets down his memories of the Brownsville section of Brooklyn in an era when life there—he would insist—was better. Mr. Tenenbaum was born in New York in 1902 and studied at the University of Missouri, Columbia University, and NYU. He has contributed to a number of magazines, and his most recent book, *Why Men Hate*, was published by the Beechhurst Press in 1947.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ing in and out, for food and reprimands, the tired, monotonous, plodding steps of the wife, as she fussed with pots, pans, dirty dishes, as she washed and ironed clothes. And in Brownsville, too, as on the East Side, the immigrants found sweatshops—real sweatshops—to work in for starvation wages, while a small minority of the more ambitious scrimped together a few dollars and opened shabby little candy stores, grocery stores with empty shelves, dark, uninviting dry goods stores, delicatessen stores with rickety chairs.

The homes were dull by comparison with the street, which was the scene of neighborhood living. When a child became sick enough to be taken to a hospital—may it happen only to one's enemies—the entire block was sad. No polite ladies peeped from behind curtains. In Brownsville, the women were curious without curtains, and you may be sure that little escaped them. When a girl strayed and had an illegitimate child: woe to that girl and woe to that family!

IN ALL of this, I assume, there is nothing unique, nothing that is not more or less true of all poor, dispossessed communities. But this is not really my story, which concerns a Brownsville in which there was such a love of learning, such a respect for ideals and idealists, as I have encountered nowhere else.

Today, children may go to school as part of a compulsory routine. In Brownsville when I knew it, school was a major occupation, not of the children alone but of the whole neighborhood. Every teacher was discussed with the minute detail a jeweler devotes to a watch; the principal of the local public school had the same authority and prestige as the most learned dean of our most respected university. School to Brownsville represented a glorious future that would rescue it from want, deprivation, and ugliness. It did not matter how poor and poverty-stricken these ex-East Siders themselves may have been—when it came to education, nothing was too good, no sacrifice was too great for them to make. Harvard, Princeton, Yale—the lowliest Brownsville family did not regard these institutions as too good for their children.

As I recall my childhood, we were all measured in educational potential. Next to an allegation of illegitimacy, nothing more damaging could be said than: "He has a stuffed head. In school, he's put back and left back." The relative scholastic progress of the children provoked intense jealousy and rivalry among neighbors. On coming home from work, the first question the good Brownsville father asked was: "What happened in school?" And the child had to bring out the test papers and the marks.

"My Milton got all A's." Milton's mother would look down her nose at Harry's mother, whose son "got all B's." Don't talk of failure—then the whole house went into mourning.

The Abramowitz family included five sons and one daughter. Mr. Abramowitz, a successful butcher, was regarded as a real millionaire: the women said he "had at least ten thousand dollars." They lived in a detached house with a porch, and at night, the women said, Mrs. Abramowitz's big pots "overflowed with meat and every luxury that a stomach could imagine . . . like a hotel. . . ." But all did not go well in this troubled world for the Abramowitzes. Five of the six children did poorly at school and the meat was as lead in the Abramowitzes' mouths; no one envied them. "What can you expect of butchers' children?" said the women. "Butchers' children remain butchers."

As tall, powerful Mr. Abramowitz hewed away at big chunks of meat, one could feel his sense of frustration and inferiority. One child, David, showed promise: he did well at school, and he went regularly to the library and took out big books. After the family had reconciled themselves, with some difficulty, to the fact that the other children would never be great scholars, it concentrated all attention on David. When David did well in school, the whole Abramowitz family—parents, brothers, and sister—felt that they had done well. When David entered Columbia, the whole Abramowitz family felt that they had become Columbia students. When David took an examination, the whole Abramowitz family sweated it out. When David became a lawyer and opened his own office, Mr. Abramowitz wanted to cover his big butcher shop window with signs advertising the fact. David had to speak at length and persuasively before he convinced his father to substitute a small, dignified announcement. Henceforth, in Mr. Abramowitz's store the important thing was not the meat, but David, "my son, the lawyer."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I remember an elderly lady, thin, anemic-looking, and very, very sad. She came regularly to our home, always with an old creased shopping bag made of black oilcloth. When she came, my mother would gather old bread, left-over food, and whatever good food she could spare. We never regarded her as a beggar or as one asking charity. In fact, we all respected her. Her son was attending medical school. She was a widow, with two other small children, and her son had no one but her to help him. I remember the time she came to make a cash loan: her son was being graduated from medical school and he now needed money to open an office. My mother gave her ten dollars, which was an enormous sum for my family in those days. It would never occur to my mother not to make this sacrifice for so holy a purpose.

I still remember the pride with which my family looked forward to the forthcoming social visit of the doctor himself. He was coming to repay the loan personally. We had known his mother, but we had never seen the son. My mother gave the house an unusually thorough cleaning. Every member of my family was there, even my father. When the doctor came in, he was offered the best seat. My mother took out her best dishes and served cake, which she had baked especially for the occasion. As I look back at this incident, I perceive with what humility and respect my parents regarded what they thought was an educated man. My family didn't want the ten dollars which the doctor was now returning; neither did they know how to refuse it. So finally, at the end of the visit, when the doctor held out the ten dollars, my father held back from taking it; my mother did also. Since the doctor looked foolish holding the money, my mother finally stepped forward and took it, but held it in her hand lamely until the doctor left, as if not knowing what to do with it.

IF ANY social hierarchy existed in our community, the European gymnasium student ranked high, next higher came the European university student, but the aristocrat of them all, the possessor of the most exalted rank, was the Russian social revolutionist.

There was Moses, with his thick glasses, frail body, and worn threadbare coat, from whose stuffed pockets protruded bundles of newspapers and magazines. Moses had been active in radical Russian circles and when I knew him he was an anarchist, a vegetarian, and a Darwinist. In our house, he always sat at the head of the table, and he was always welcome for a meal or for any courtesy he might ask. I listened fascinated as he discussed politics or read to us from the voluminous "literature" he always carried with him. By occupation a house painter, Moses was frail and sickly, and what worried and puzzled my father was how he managed to make a living; for, in fact, Moses never seemed to be in need of money. Many years later, by chance, I encountered Moses' boss, and, naturally, we began to talk about him. "What kind of a worker was Moses?" For an answer, the man laughed. "You couldn't expect work from Moses, not from Moses!" he said. And then he told me how in the middle of a job Moses would get into long political and philosophical discussions with the other workers. I asked, "Why did you keep him?" "Moses!" he exclaimed. "Fire him! How could he make a living? With Moses, one did not try to think of profit. Why, he knew more than a professor."

Occasionally—not often—we would be defrauded, as in the case of Mr. Freedman, and the big books he took from the library, and his flowery and ornate Yiddish, so that frequently we did not understand him. Mr. Freedman boarded with the parents of a friend of mine. When I visited the family and I looked into Mr. Freedman's room, I saw him, true enough, bent over a book, but fast asleep. I even saw him at times pick up a book and, although he tried to keep his eyes open, in several minutes they began to droop. I began to suspect the intellectuality of Mr. Freedman and I imparted my doubts to my mother. At first she refused to listen, but she, too, had had occasion to observe the learned Mr. Freedman bent over a book, but fast asleep. For a while she was a little cold to Mr. Freedman but this did not last long. Soon she was welcoming him to supper with her cold cordiality. "A man," she told me afterwards, "who has dealings with such learned books can't be ordinary."

EVEN those who scoffed came to pay tribute, in their own way. Among the Brownsville settlers there arose a group who prided themselves on being hard-headed and "American." They sneered at education and their

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

measure of a man was not how learned he was but how large his bank-balance: "How big a check can he write?" Their favorite folk-tale was of the man who applied for a job, which paid a pittance, as sexton in a synagogue. He was turned down because he was an illiterate. And, continues the story, he went into business and now he is president of the synagogue.

But this same group went into the market to buy professional men as husbands for their daughters. Since doctors in Brownsville represented the apex of knowledge and wisdom, they could command a dowry of as high as twenty-five thousand dollars, pre-war value. At times, a family might subsidize the schooling of a promising student, with the understanding that when he was graduated from college he would go through with an arranged marriage. Dentists, too, had a market rating, and they commanded dowries ranging from ten to fifteen thousand dollars; teachers and accountants fetched about ten thousand; pharmacists, seven to eight thousand. Optometrists, veterinarians, engineers—all commanded a price, depending on the amount of education and the prestige of the occupation.

In other neighborhoods, the ice cream parlor, the poolroom, the dance hall was the favorite gathering-place. In Brownsville, it was the library on Glenmore and Watkins Avenues. There we got to know one another, there we argued about books and writers, there we made intellectual discoveries. We were first-generation ghetto immigrants. Our taste in literature did not come to us by family tradition; we ran across books and authors by chance, mostly by hit-and-miss. Hence, our password: "Do you know of a good book?" I "discovered" Jack London, Upton Sinclair, Oscar Wilde, Bernard Shaw, H. G. Wells; and I am indebted to a friend, my high school teacher, who introduced me to Balzac, Romain Rolland, Zola, Anatole France, Maupassant.

A book such as *Jean Christophe* was kept hidden in a special alcove, carefully guarded by a vinegary librarian. I remember how she scrutinized me to see if I came up to specifications, whether I was of the right age and maturity. Never have I seen anyone—before or since—hand out a book more unwillingly and disapprovingly, as if she herself had somehow become an unwilling accomplice in a plot to undermine public morals. If the truth be told, many of my books seemed to come from that forbidden section, so that the librarian, even when I didn't ask her for a book, developed a special disapproving eye for me. I remember by chance picking up *Dame Care*. I began reading the book in the stacks, standing up, hour after hour, how many I will never know. I was brought back to this world by flickering lights, which was the librarian's signal for closing time. I now own *Dame Care* but I have never re-read the book. My wife who has read it lately tells me it's so-so.

The library was something more than a place where one went for books. Here one met and made friends, those from high school, but even more important, those men and women who had little formal schooling, who worked in factories and were Socialists, anarchists, Zionists, Macfaddenites, chiropractors, atheists, food faddists, sun worshipers, Buddhists; men and women who wanted so much from life: to be great writers, to be great humanitarian leaders, to be innovators of world-shaking importance.

In the files of the library, one can find today the reminiscences of a Brownsville librarian, which he published in a professional journal about forty years ago. Excerpts follow:

". . . you are constantly beseeched for more books on sociology and for the best of the continental literature. Your reading room is full of young men preparing themselves for civil service and college-entrance examinations. Your reference desk is overtaxed with demands for material for debate on every conceivable public question, from 'equal pay for women' to the comparative merits of the library and the gymnasium. And there are more youngsters awaiting help in looking up every single allusion in their text-books than the assistants can serve . . . and what is better still, you have to be conservative and ever on your guard lest your reading public increase three times as fast as the library's resources. . . .

"Their reading is an odd mixture of the serious and the childish. Their race tragedy often sobers them in appearance and taste early, and as is well known they are very precocious. Sometimes a little toddler will come in whose head just reaches up to the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

registration desk and to the surprise of all . . . will read right off some paragraph given as a test. . . . Toward those books whose use some libraries restrict, the attitude of the adults is very liberal. No explanation completely satisfies them and their indignation rises high when they learn that libraries occasionally see fit to withhold certain volumes of Tolstoy, of Zola, or of Shaw."

I SHOULD like to tell you about Ribber, a shy, timid, sad boy. His parents were impoverished, and Ribber only managed to stay in school by selling pretzels on street corners. In school he did not do well, and in his sophomore year he was flunked out. Ribber continued selling pretzels. One day I met him in the library, and I spoke to him for the first time. I do not believe that he was more than nineteen or twenty, but he took from his pocket letters from famous universities (if I am not mistaken, one of the universities was either Harvard or Chicago) thanking him for his contributions of rare and old editions of Shakespeare and the Bible. He showed me communications with professors. In fact, he had now in his possession a rare edition of the Bible, and he was debating with himself whether to donate it to a professor in the Princeton Theological Seminary or to a professor in the Jewish Theological Seminary. He even knew what scholars would most appreciate the worth of his rare finds. He refused all payments. And how did he—this pretzel seller—find these books and how was he able to buy them? They weren't costly, he explained. "This valuable Bible," he said, talking about his latest find, "cost me eighty-five cents. I picked it up from a pushcart." It was a matter, he told me, of having the patience to seek and of being able to recognize what was valuable.

ANOTHER shrine of the neighborhood was the Labor Lyceum, the official headquarters of the Socialist party and the local trade union. Presiding over this institution was Sol Hurok, whose early entrepreneurial ability was devoted to managing the campaigns of the local Socialist party. Hurok first learned to make culture pay when, to gather funds for the party, he organized concerts with the help of top-flight artists and also with the lesser talents of loyal party members.

Early, Hurok showed that he had a unique talent for gathering dollars. Hurok would carefully coach the members of the Young People's Socialist League on the art of selling the magazines and pamphlets that both furthered the cause and helped the party's treasury. When all other Socialist party locals were conducting perfunctory campaigns, Hurok, with the same undeviating purpose with which he raised money, rallied speakers and supporters, flooded the district with leaflets, Socialist newspapers, and circulars, arranged monster mass meetings. In fact, Brownsville was among the first districts in New York State to elect a Socialist assemblyman, Abraham Shiplacoff.

During campaigns, the Labor Lyceum was the center for Socialist propaganda, but during the year the building bulged with educational activities. The courses and the lectures scorned such practical and mundane matters as salesmanship, charm, or personality. Instead, Brownsville flocked to hear erudite discussions on such subjects as: "Moses, Jesus, Spinoza, and Marx," "The History of Human Thought as Exemplified in the Workers' Struggle Against Capitalism," "Kropotkin, Spencer, and Marx," "Dickens, Zola, Flaubert, as Interpreted from the Viewpoint of the Class Struggle," "The History of Philosophy, from Greek to Modern Times."

Either in the Labor Lyceum or in other educational forums, which dotted the neighborhood, proponents of all causes found adherents. Anarchists held meetings in which they held forth on free love, the essential goodness of man, the abolition of police and jails. Health faddists conducted campaigns against doctors, who, they maintained, were part of a giant conspiracy to keep the workers sick. Birth-control advocates here had strong support and sympathy. In fact, it was here that Margaret Sanger in 1916 established the first birth-control clinic in America. Zionists, too, in a more quiet way, were equally active.

IN THE course of writing this article, I revisited my neighborhood. I have not lived there for nearly a quarter of a century. There are still pushcarts in Brownsville; the street life is still teeming and dramatic. But the old Brownsville—the one that loved learning and knowledge—is gone. Brownsville is now "Americanized," with the movies, the radio, the automobile, the national chain stores (no

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

longer independent little stores) providing focal points. Still essentially a Jewish community, the stream has not been fed by new immigrants. The shabby old tenements, more odorous now and more dilapidated, are being occupied by an influx of new minority groups, probably even more dispossessed and less advantaged than the immigrant Jews. Large numbers of Negroes have entered this community; also Italians, White Russians, Arabians, Syrians.

Brownsville residents, in the course of time getting better jobs and becoming more prosperous, began to desert the ghetto community for more fashionable areas – Flatbush, the Bronx, Riverside Drive, the West Side of Manhattan. The exodus was especially rapid among the second generation, who, unlike their parents, did not develop close ties with neighbors, civic associations, or the local synagogue.

Not everyone left, of course. I remember one family that lived directly underneath an elevated train. The father was a push-cart peddler, but he had two daughters who were school teachers, a son who was an accountant, and three other daughters, two who worked in offices and one who worked in a factory. The girls especially wanted to move, since they felt that the shabby house harmed their marital chances. The father was adamant in insisting on remaining. "Look," the father once told me, pointing to the rumbling sound made by a passing train. "It's like music. If you look outside the window, it's always like a show." And that was his favorite recreation after tramping the streets all day—looking out the window and watching the train pass directly before him.

At times, the departure of the young from the family home had painful consequences. There were the Silvermans, whose son, a successful doctor, moved to Riverside Drive. The Silvermans one day went to visit their son. They came back disappointed. They told of a "fancy soldier," and how he telephoned, and then the "soldier" said the doctor was not at home. They went several other times, and always with the same results. After that, the Silvermans rarely spoke of their son. He would occasionally visit the family, but his visits became fewer and further apart. It would not be truthful to say that this was an isolated case. Such things happened, even to Brownsville parents.

By and large, however, successful children were exceedingly solicitous of their parents. They came back to the old homestead for family reunions and they plied their parents with expensive gifts. When the Cohens celebrated their fortieth wedding anniversary, a son presented them with a tour of Palestine. Another son made a generous gift to a local hospital, and still another made a generous donation to their parents' favorite charity. In a family on my block, one of the sons who had become a millionaire (a real one) lavished luxuries on his parents. He renovated their two-family house with so many improvements and so many modern gadgets that it became a community showplace. The parents generally protested against such extravagance and it was clearly the children who had the greater pleasure, perhaps nostalgic, in generously giving.

RECENTLY I visited the library on Glenmore and Watkins Avenues. Physically, I found the place as charming as I remembered it. The tables were polished; the floors were waxed; the iron grillwork on the balcony was as graceful as ever; the books were as inviting. But there was a strange and eerie quiet. I was astonished to learn that the library was open only twice a week, and that even for this limited period, there was little activity. Two librarians were eager to serve me. What a change from my youth when we waited outside in long lines for the library to open, so that we could enter first and rush for our favorite book!

I walked over to the Labor Lyceum. The street was familiar, but the building itself looked strange to me. In front of the building, huge trucks were being loaded. The building had been converted to a factory. If you look upward toward the roof, you can still see the name "Labor Lyceum" clearly inscribed.

Brownsville's body is still there, but not the soul.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

CEDARS OF LEBANON

SOME YIDDISH PROVERBS

A Handful of Latter-Day Wisdom

A PROVERB is generally said to be a concentrate of folklore and folk-sagacity, a statement earthy, popular, and with an immediately felt point. However, the proverb is not this by origin but, as it were, by reaction. In a book of the New Testament, we find the following injunction: "Now speakest thou plainly and speakest no proverbs." This indicates what the original idea of a proverb was: an enigma, a parable, a religious or philosophic statement with a hidden, esoteric meaning. But in the course of time the idea of a proverb was turned on its head. It came to be an oblique, "common" wisdom, a sharp and pungent contrast of the "facts of life" to all the rhetoric of intellectuals, priests, and politicians. "God loves the poor and helps the rich," a Yiddish proverb says.

The Yiddish proverb, as the heir to the Bible, the Talmud, medieval Arabic philosophy, East European folklore, and the secular enlightenment of the modern era, has a wide expanse in which to sow and reap. It is armed with the inevitable ironic thrust against all "ideologies" which would rouge over the sordid trials of living, making a living, suffering, and dying. Already in Ecclesiastes we read: "A living dog is better than a dead lion"—there is no room here for the "noble lies" of chivalry. And a later proverb says succinctly: "The crow flies high and alights on a pig." Nor is there any reason why the official representatives of the Jewish religion itself should be exempt: "Better an unknown thief than an out-of-town rabbi."

The proverbs printed here are taken from a volumn, *Yiddish Proverbs,* edited by H. J. Ayalti, which is to be published shortly by Schocken Books as number 20 of the Schocken Library. They appear here by Schocken's permission. The book will have the transliterated Yiddish text and an English translation by Isidore Goldstick on facing pages.—ED.

A FRIEND is got for nothing, an enemy has to be paid for.

THE tavern can't corrupt a good man, the synagogue can't reform a bad one.

A MAN should live if only to satisfy his curiosity.

"FOR example" is no proof.

THE shlemiel lands on his back and bruises his nose.

A SHREW of a wife may yet be somewhat in the right.

"THOU has chosen us from among the nations"—why did You have to pick on the Jews?

So many Hamans and but one Purim.

A DEAD man is mourned seven days, a fool—his lifetime.

YOUR health comes first—you can always hang yourself later.

WHEN a Jew can't be a cobbler, he dreams of being a professor.

WHEN a poor man gets to eat a chicken, one of them is sick.

A MAN who's too good for the world is no good to his wife.

IF you're going to fight with the rabbi, you'd better be on good terms with the saloonkeeper.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

WHEN a mother calls her child "bastard," you can take her word for it.

WITH luck, even your ox will calve.

THE girl who can't dance says the band can't play.

IF God were living on earth, people would break his windows.

HE who has a grudge against the chazan also begrudges the "Amen."

SPIT in a whore's face, and she will say it is raining.

THAT fools are fond of sweets is an invention of the wise.

THE wise man lays plans, but so does the fool.

A JEW beats you up and shouts "Help!"

TRUTH rests with God alone, and a little with me.

HE owes God for his soul, and the butcher for the meat.

"WHO is a hero?"—he who keeps down a wisecrack.

TEN waters will not cleanse you of Jewish talk.

GOD will provide—if only God would provide until He provides.

YOU don't stumble because you are weak, but because you think yourself strong.

IF THE rich could hire others to die for them, the poor could make a nice living.

IT's good to feast with your fellow, but not from one plate.

KNOCK your head against the wall—but there must be a wall.

NINE rabbis don't make a minyan, but ten cobblers do.

MANY complain of their looks, but none of their brains.

POVERTY is no disgrace, but it's no great honor either.

BETTER a Jew without a beard than a beard without a Jew.

TRUTH never dies, but lives a wretched life.

IF you have the bread, you can always find a knife.

IF the horse had anything to say, he would speak up.

HE who is known for an early riser may lie abed till noon.

IF praying did any good, they'd be hiring men to pray.

ONLY one God and so many enemies.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ON THE HORIZON

Training Film for Democrats

RICHARD M. CLURMAN

HOME OF THE BRAVE is the latest in what by now is a familiar American cultural product: the "problem movie." It tells the story of a volunteer patrol of American soldiers out on a pre-invasion mission to reconnoiter a Pacific island occupied by the Japanese. One of the volunteers—to everyone's astonishment—is a Negro, taken along, with considerable misgivings, because he is the only available surveyor at the base. During a four-day sortie into the jungle, the members of the group manage to express a variety of attitudes toward the Negro surveyor. On the final day, the Negro's close friend and benign protector is killed under circumstances so traumatic and full of guilt-potential for the Negro, that he is stricken with partial amnesia and paralysis of the legs. He is finally cured by an army psychiatrist who uncovers, and with equal swiftness explains away, the Negro's sense of guilt. What scant plot there is serves merely as a peg on which to hang the film's sententious dialogue. The situation develops and is resolved largely through a series of explanations, exchanges, speeches, and—as a last convenient resort—with the assistance of the psychiatrist, who explains, as actor-narrator, what the dialogue or action has only dimly hinted.

In a film without a real plot, and with virtually nothing but attitudes and some stray bits of psychological insight to keep the story alive, it is what the characters *say* that counts. In *Home of the Brave* they always seem to say the right or wrong thing depending upon whether they are right or wrong characters, just as if they understood what was expected of them as prototypes. To the credit of the film's producers, the characters do seem thoroughly "researched," even if they seldom resemble the soldiers one might encounter in an orderly room or on a reconnaissance patrol in the jungle.

THE economics of script writing for "problem movies" seems to demand that no character be wasted, that no event be allowed to pass without later assuming some special importance. It is unthinkable for a character to be wounded in the arm or for a map case to be left behind without the injured arm or the forgotten map case later showing up to turn the trick, prove the point, or in some contrived way complete the jig-saw puzzle. In *Home of the Brave* this economical attitude makes it necessary for each person and almost every speech to illustrate some discrete aspect of the relations between Negroes and whites. There are none of the wasted motions that are the very substance of less pointed lives.

Where the Jews in *Crossfire* and *Gentleman's Agreement* could just as easily have been Eskimos, the Negro in *Home of the Brave* is fortunately an unmistakable Negro. Moss talks like a Negro, looks like one, and is plagued by problems that only a Negro experiences. When the psychiatrist explains away these differences to the satisfaction of Moss's "head but not [his] heart," there is Moss's presence to refute him: the dark skin, the broad nose, the slight accent, the sensitivity on the subject of lynching. Moss's

---

IN THIS month's "On the Horizon," devoted to shorter articles on the cultural scene, RICHARD M. CLURMAN discusses the movie "Home of the Brave," and NICOLAS CLARION reports on a recent French literary phenomenon. Mr. Clurman is editorial assistant on COMMENTARY. He was born in New York in 1925 and attended the University of Chicago, where he was managing editor of the *University Observer*. Mr. Clarion is a Rumanian-born French journalist now living in this country. He is the author of *Le Glacis Soviétique*, and has published articles in COMMENTARY, the *New Republic*, the *Reporter*, and other periodicals.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

opposite number, "T.J.", is a composite malcontent. He not only uses freely such words as "nigger," "boogie," "shine," "nigger-lover," etc., but he combines this unsavory attribute with laziness (he complains about his bad back—the typical "goldbrick's" excuse), selfishness (he would eat all the fried chicken if nobody stopped him), a feeling of superiority (he had a better civilian job than anybody else), unattractiveness to women (at thirty-six he's so disagreeable that he's been unable to find a wife), and—greatest of all sins—cowardice.

Sergeant Mingo is a delegate from the common-sense-and-decency caucus. Negroes get no special treatment from him. Mingo is interested neither in championing a cause nor in dealing with the "Negro problem." He has "no more use for a bad black man than a bad white man and [he has] known plenty of both." He is the American common man: sensible, affectionately tough, decent but not to a fault. It is patently easy, as one sits in the theater, to fit oneself comfortably into Mingo's fatigues.

On the other hand, Moss's friend Finch is a rather pathetic, confused figure. Finch's relations with Moss are absurdly warm and intimate, cemented by something which quite unintentionally is made to look like homosexuality, and which in turn makes a shambles of what little authentic characterization there is. To be sure, it is seldom enough that a close friendship between two white men is adequately expressed on the screen, much less the more uncommon intimacy of a Negro and a white man. The result in *Home of the Brave* is an embarrassing relationship expressed throughout the film by Moss saying "Charming," and Finch replying "Delightful," almost as if they sensed uneasily the falseness of the happy-go-lucky "normal" roles assigned them. And, to give the whole saccharine lie away, when Finch is killed, and Mingo—now crippled for life—replaces Finch as the symbol of white enlightenment, then Mingo takes on all the attributes of his predecessor in this role, including one painful "Charming" and a few friendly slaps on the back.

Finally, to complete the race-relations spectrum, there is young Major Robinson, well-meaning, politely prejudiced, but every inch the "good officer," who takes care of his men, knows his job, and tries earnestly but unsuccessfully to forget that Moss is a Negro.

Before the patrol is safely off the island, with Finch's corpse left behind, the "Negro problem" has been stated as fully as it can be on an island in the Pacific. There are half-hearted attempts to introduce other motifs: the loss of the maps, Mingo's tender but unappreciated feeling for his wife, the Major's youthful insecurity. But none of these comes through. It is the Negro, as a problem—his past, his present, and his future—that holds one's attention. All else is trappings.

THE FILM medium is seldom used today to tell a complicated or interesting story. What one finds instead is a set of devices, gimmicks, and angles that replace the narrative. Psychoanalysis, the latest of these devices, is in many ways the most convenient from the movie-maker's point of view. It uses a strange but personal—"it could happen to you"—language. Like the flashback or the dream, it eliminates the necessity for telling a story within the conventions of time or place. It gives the deceptive appearance of drama to a totally undramatic device, the explanation—what cannot be shown by action or characterization, the psychiatrist explains. And—above all—it legitimizes that explanation by an appeal to "science."

Home of the Brave is built on the psychiatric couch. If a ragged edge of doubt remains about the source of Moss's affliction, the doctor obligingly points out: "There, Mossy—that sensitivity—that's the disease you've got. It was there before anything happened on the island. It started way back. It isn't your fault. You didn't ask for it. It's a legacy. A hundred and fifty years of slavery and second-class citizenship, of being different. You had the feeling of difference pounded into you when you were a child—and being a child you turned it into guilt. You've always had that guilt inside of you. . . . Do you understand?"

And so Moss is made to "understand," to see his problem in an entirely new perspective—indeed, in a perspective that the film has completely failed to prepare him and its audience for; in a curious way, the "explanation" takes on a momentum of its own and finally belies the plot. Does Moss have the sickness, or do his white antagonists? Is it really a question of his "sensitivity,"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

or is one permitted to retain the original impression that Moss has in fact been hounded and persecuted by the white world since childhood? Is *Home of the Brave* a movie to "adjust" the Negro or to dramatize his very real problems?

Certainly it tries to do both at times. But when the psychiatric explanation is in—and it is unmistakably the point of the film—the "message" has been changed to a comfortable drawing-room observation. What began as the mindlessness and error of the white world is transformed into a Negro neurosis, a persecution obsession, in its very abnormality less disquieting than if the original impression remained that Moss was not sick, suffered no myopia, saw the world really as it is for him. But Moss *is* cured. As the film ends, he and Mingo are returning to the States happily contemplating the bar and grill they will run together, each with his own personal "handicap" to face and conquer. The Negro is "adjusted," he holds his head high and erect, in a perfect position for the executioner's axe.

HOME OF THE BRAVE very much resembles the livelier educational films. It has the same documentary style, the same unreality, the same confident assurance that no problem need go unsolved, and the same narrator—this time in the more glamorous guise of the psychiatrist.

Despite its many faults—its artistic failure, its slavish devotion to its rather confused "point," and the fact that it deals with the Negro in the most untypical circumstances (in the army, in combat, on a Pacific atoll, and on a psychiatric couch)—it does try, as honestly as it knows how, to say the "right" thing in the most effective way, using the most impressive evidence it can command. It would certainly be ungrateful—if not a trifle snobbish—to dismiss *Home of the Brave* for its artistic shortcomings alone. What is most disturbing about the film is that its very effectiveness as *persuasion* is questionable. Certainly the film medium does offer immense possibilities for circulating an idea or for proving a point, but it may be precisely these rich potentialities for persuasion that lead earnest and well-intentioned producers astray: in their preoccupation with the "point," they fall in to a factitiousness that no high-minded intentions can disguise.

Home of the Brave may be taken as a sign of heightened consciousness in an industry rarely credited (except by its own spokesmen) with a sense of public responsibility, as a long-overdue act of contrition, or as a rebuke to the mythically-powerful Southern theater owner whose tender sensibilities have hitherto demanded so much protection. If the film is indeed any of these, then perhaps it is not too optimistic to hope that in the future we may have, not more "pro-Negro" films, but films in which the Negro in America will be portrayed as a living creature surrounded by other living creatures who are something more than slaves to a point.

For, after all, it is only the teacher—rarely the student—who really enjoys the educational film.

Messiah of Lettrisme

NICOLAS CLARION

THERE is not a single habitué of the Parisian literary cafés, and scarcely a single French intellectual, who is not now aware of the existence of Isidor Isou—a young man of twenty-four who came to Paris on foot from Botosani, Rumania, in 1945, penniless, without official papers and barely speaking French, but armed with the unshakeable conviction that he was called upon to "revolutionize"—immediately and on a planetary scale—"art, poetry, literature, and music."

A coterie of young people, assembled God knows how, accepted with uncontrolled enthusiasm the literary theory of the apostle from Botosani: poetry has nothing to do with literature, and in order to liberate poetry from its chains in this atomic century, it is necessary to destroy not only the verse forms, but the words themselves. "The new art," declared Isou (his real name is Isidor Goldstein), "accepts as its subject matter the letters reduced to, and become simply, themselves, replacing completely all poetic and musical elements which go beyond the letters in order to shape them into coherent works." Thus was born Lettrisme, which may be regarded as a resurrection of some old avant-garde theories, or as a postwar symptom comparable to the explosions of Surrealism and Dada after World War I. To the "seven manifestos of Dada," Isou opposed the thick *Introduction à une nouvelle poesie et à une*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

nouvelle musique, which was issued by Gallimard, under threat, in case of refusal, of seeing its publishing house serve as fuel for a bonfire by the enthusiasts of Lettrisme. Among the "classics" of the new art, there is the following poem, which bears the title "Sabbatical Orchestra of Infernal Spirits During a Sultry Summer Night":

Bidingili; tingi-tingi!
Vingilingi; clingi-dingi!
Clingilingi; ringi-lingi!
Vou. . . .

Despite such splendid examples of the new poetry, the commercial success of the volume was not sufficient to provide for the material needs of the champion of the "liberation of poetry." Isidor Isou resigned himself to a bit of "journalism." He published in a weekly newspaper a series of interviews with André Gide, Jules Romains, François Mauriac, and others. This enterprise suffered a misfortune: Isou had never bothered to ask the persons interviewed to reply to his questions, but, instead, had taken the liberty of answering his own questions for them. The result of this experiment in journalism was that the weekly which had hired him was forced to dispense with his talents.

Poor, but overflowing with certitudes, Isou published a new book: *L'agrégation d'un nom et d'un Messie*—a "novel" that effaced all distinctions between the Messiah and the founder of Lettrisme. Although the radio and newspapers—above all the witty weekly *Le Canard Enchainé*—were happy to publicize the astonishing personality of the "Pope of Lettrisme," Isou still did not succeed in gaining the attention of the public. In an article in the literary magazine *Fontaine,* he declared himself disabused: "We need a joint stock company . . . partnership, trust, etc. . . . possessing the capital necessary to launch this art as one today launches a cabinet minister, a writer, a new brand of preserves. It is toward this that our efforts are now directed." But this cry remained without echo, and the capitalists paid no heed to such a promising investment.

Isou then turned to *"l'agitation de quartier."* All along certain streets of the Latin Quarter, he plastered multi-colored posters, announcing in large brush-drawn letters:

12,000,000 youth
are going
to descend into the street
to make
La Révolution Lettriste

The good citizens of Paris, who are not inexperienced in revolutions, passed these posters by with such indifference that Isou decided he would have to "make his killing" outside the sphere of Lettrisme itself. He published, consequently, a brochure with the superbly restrained title *La mécanique des femmes,* in the preface of which he declared that he did not believe that the police would arrest him "for this schoolboy exercise," for he had already made public "a far more dangerous intention," i.e., *"la Révolution Lettriste."* However, it appears that Jules Moch, the Socialist Minister of the Interior, is a man insensitive to subtleties: he ordered Isou arrested for endangering morals—and thereby made the young man's fortune. *La mécanique des femmes* is at present being sold under the table at fantastic black-market prices.

Interrogated by Magistrate Baurès as to the reasons that caused him to publish his brochure, Isou declared: "Far from being convinced that this work is amoral, it is my conviction that it can make a useful contribution to the education of youth." The disbelieving judge dispatched the "Pope of Lettrisme" to a psychiatrist for examination.

Oh, melancholy destiny of the pathbreaker to the future!

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE STUDY OF MAN

HOW MANY JEWS IN AMERICA?

Why We Don't Know

SOPHIA M. ROBISON

CLOSER to the art of divination than to science is the study of the American Jewish population today. The truth is that—popular belief notwithstanding—we have no reliable knowledge of such elementary facts as how many Jews are born in America in a year, how many die, what their age distribution is, how many go to school. Indeed, we are perhaps most in the dark about that most elementary of all questions: how many Jews are there? True enough, persons who consider themselves well informed will say with little hesitation that there are about five million Jews in the United States—and that their number is increasing. Yet this good, round, concrete figure is based on a shaky structure of guesswork, ranging from the ingenious to the simple.

The crucial fact about the study of American Jewish population is that the United States Census, the statistical basis for a vast amount of sociological study and speculation about all sorts of questions, includes no questions on religious affiliation. There is no official count of Catholics, Protestants, and Jews in the United States, as there is in Canada, most European countries, Palestine, and elsewhere. Without this basic count, and the supplementary information on births and deaths, on immigration and emigration, and on age distribution, it is impossible to state with definiteness how many Jews there are in the United States, and whether their number is increasing or decreasing.

During the first fifty years of the history of the republic there was little interest in the census except as a count of the population. In the last fifty years, the development of the Hollerith machine, and the replacing of hand by mechanical tabulation, enormously increased the possibilities of using the data as a tool for understanding and a guide to social planning. But by that time there were a number of Jewish organizations that felt distinctly uncomfortable over the prospect of an official count of Jews, and preferred not to press the matter. In fact, only recently the pressure of certain Jewish organizations led to the abandonment of the last official count of Jews maintained by the governments—the listing of immigrants by "race," among them "Hebrew." It is perfectly obvious why Jewish organizations should protest against what amounted to official recognition of the "Hebrews" as a "race." On the other hand, the last candle was blown out and we are left completely in the statistical dark.

Today, organizations responsible for spending millions of dollars for services to the Jewish community have no good population data to use in planning their services, for today or the future. The Council of Jewish Federations and Welfare Funds finds it needs population data in some detail to advise local communities correctly. The Jewish Welfare Board, responsible

---

THAT there are substantial numbers of Jews in America seems to be an established fact; yet just how many there are, is a subject about which the experts fall out among themselves. Here SOPHIA M. ROBISON recounts the various (and often bizarrely indirect) attempts to measure accurately America's Jewish population—and offers some figures of her own. Mrs. Robison is associate professor of social work at the New York School of Social Work. She has edited a volume, *Jewish Population Studies* (1943), and is the author of several other books on social problems. She received her AB from Wellesley College in 1909, and her MA and PhD from Columbia University.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

for setting up and helping plan the programs of Jewish community centers, would like to know the distribution of Jewish young people and children. The American Association for Jewish Education would like to know the distribution by neighborhoods of Jewish children of school age. The United Service for New Americans, interested in placing immigrants in communities, would like to know what kinds of congregations, what proportions of Yiddish-speaking Jews, what kinds of occupational opportunities, are to be found in different communities.

Besides these practical organizational needs, there are also the demands of organizations interested primarily in research, in the expansion of our knowledge about Jews—the Conference on Jewish Relations, the Yiddish Scientific Institute (Yivo), and the research arms of the American Jewish Committee and the American Jewish Congress. The study of almost any Jewish sociological or psychological problem must either be based on population data, or needs population data as background.

LACKING the (apparently) solid foundation of the census, Jews have resorted to a variety of makeshifts to fill their needs. Let us look now at the data that these methods have made available, how it has been collected, and what may be learned from it.

The available data is summed up in tables in the *American Jewish Year Book,* published by the American Jewish Committee, which has for many years published estimates of the Jewish population by states. These figures have served as a kind of "official" estimate of the number of Jews. In the past, the estimates were those of the decennial Census of Religious Bodies.* In the current Volume 50, a new and much more detailed set of estimates is published by Ben B. Seligman and Harvey Swados, based on the answers of local communal authorities to a questionnaire by the Council of Jewish Federations and Welfare Funds, supplemented by records kept by the Council, the United Jewish Appeal, and the Bureau of War Records of the Jewish Welfare Board.

In only some of these cities has there been some organized effort to count, or by some rigorous procedure estimate, the Jewish population (the methods that have been used will be described below); in those cases where there have been no surveys of any kind, there exist traditional estimates. (One respondent answers for a community of twenty thousand Jews, "No one seems to know the origin of our estimate.") Seligman and Swados, pointing to the various sources of error that arise in a survey of the type they have conducted, comment that "national fund-raising organizations may have a tendency to overestimate population statistics; contrariwise, local fund raisers sometimes tend to underestimate their populations."

There are, however, studies of individual cities on more solid scientific footing. We have the volume of *Jewish Population Studies,* edited by the present writer in 1943, in which rather full data is given for ten cities. There are a number of PhD and other scholarly surveys: of New Orleans by Rabbi Julian B. Feibelman, of Jacksonville by William Boxerman. There are a number of WPA projects: Samuel Koenig's study of Stamford, and Mathews and McGill's study of the youth of New York City, in which a careful sample of youth of all denominations for the entire city of New York permits us to make a fairly good estimate of the Jewish population of New York in 1934.

IN COMMUNITIES with very few Jews it is possible to get a fairly good estimate of the population from some well-placed local informant. All the Jews in the locality are known, and with a relatively small error, they can all be enumerated. When the number of Jews in a town rises to one or two thousand, this kind of informal enumeration no longer achieves reliable results. It is particularly for the larger cities, in which the great bulk of Jews live,

* The Census of Religious Bodies was conducted every ten years, primarily to reveal the number of congregations and churches of each sect, capital investments, value of church property, and—for some denominations—the number of members and Sunday school registrants. Church membership, however, is a variable concept: Catholics include all infants baptized, many Protestant sects include only adult members. The Jewish agent of the census decided that he would get estimates of the total number of Jews in each city or town, on the theory that, in an ideological sense, all Jews are members of the congregation. The result was a set of estimates that gave neither synagogue membership nor the total population with any accuracy. In any case, the gross totals, without detail or breakdown, are almost useless for communal planning.

While Jewish demographers were trying to persuade the Jewish agent to improve his procedures, Congress cut the appropriations for the Bureau of the Census, leading to the elimination of the religious census planned for 1947.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

that an armory of special techniques for estimating Jewish population has been developed by demographers. The estimates given by these various techniques become embodied in official statistics, and are used for all sorts of purposes, with little indication of the variability in the different procedures.

One device used to get detailed information on Jews is that of interpolation from census data for areas known to be Jewish. These areas are "known" to be Jewish as a matter of common knowledge (they may be, of course, 99, 75, or only 50 per cent Jewish—this prime fact is unknown). Once these areas are determined, it is assumed that the demographic detail for these areas applies to Jews of the community as a whole: the age breakdown, marital status breakdown, median rent, average years of schooling, found for the census tracts known to be Jewish, are considered true for the Jews of the entire community.

Sometimes we can do better in determining the Jewish areas. In 1920 in New York, for example, it was safe to assume that the "Russian-born" population of the census was predominantly Jewish. Accordingly assumptions about the Jewish population were based on the characteristics of the population of the areas in which the Russian-born were concentrated. Obviously, as the proportion of foreign born in the population declines, it becomes impossible to determine the Jewish areas in this way. For example, the new Jewish sections of Queens and Long Island do not have any sizable proportion of Russian-born.

The "death rate" method was used in estimating New York City's population in 1900, 1910, and 1925. If the Jewish births—or deaths—can be identified for a given city or town, it is then thought possible to apply a Census Bureau formula and get an estimate of local Jewish population. However, one has to make the assumption that Jewish and non-Jewish death rates are the same: and this is most likely not true. In the 1925 New York estimate made by this method, it was too enormous a task to determine all the Jewish dead of New York: a sample of sixteen census tracts out of approximately thirty-four hundred in the city was selected, and it was on the basis of this that the total estimate was built up.

One can introduce a number of refinements in this kind of work. A. A. Jaffe, who is responsible for the Chicago estimate (1930) of 265,000 Jews, used, instead of a general death rate to figure the Jewish population, the rate for the occupational and economic strata in which Jews are most heavily represented. It is hardly necessary to labor the drawbacks in these methods: one cannot be sure the dead are Jews, one cannot be sure what death rate is the right one to apply, one cannot be sure the areas one has selected as a sample form a good sample, or what part of the whole Jewish population they form, and the fact that one works with Jewish *areas*—whose characteristics are affected to an unknown extent by the non-Jews in them—introduces further unknown distortions. Then of course this method is only useful for giving an estimate of *total* population, and the necessary *details* for community planning must then be estimated some other way.

Almost everything one might say in criticism of the death rate method is true for the "Yom Kippur" method—though the latter is certainly less ghoulish. This is the American version of an approach first used in London in 1892. Llewlyn Smith figured the Jewish population as six times the number of Jewish children listed in a parliamentary report of school attendance. The American school system does not list the religion of its students. However, the number of Jewish children is ingeniously estimated by subtracting school attendance on Yom Kippur from average school attendance. The number is then multiplied by the ratio of school children to the total population, as shown for that area by the census. Again, various refinements are possible: one can take the ratio of school children to total population that prevails in the specific areas known to be Jewish, and so on. But of course, this method begs the question of whether the same proportion of Jewish children as of non-Jewish go to school, and by its very nature it can give no peculiarities of Jewish family size or age distribution.

Sometimes lists of Jewish names are used as an index to the size of the total Jewish population. For example, the Jewish Welfare Board collected at great expense a supposedly complete list of Jewish soldiers. One can then assume that the proportion of Jewish soldiers to the total Jewish population is the same as the proportion of all American soldiers to the total American population.

A rather different approach from all these is to collect a master list of all Jews in the community—gathered from lists of contributors to Jewish funds, of members of organizations,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

supplemented in some cases by such sources as lists of kosher butchers, delicatessen shops, and in-going and out-going Jewish families kept by some real-estate firms. This master list may then serve as the basis for a house-to-house canvass which will determine the number in each household, age, and so on. Of course, all depends on the completeness of the original list, and particularly in large communities there is no good way of telling how complete the list is, short of a complete census.

Most of the ten studies in *Jewish Population Studies,* our main source for detailed knowledge of the Jewish population, are based on the use of the master list.

We may illustrate this method at its most sophisticated level by describing a recent large-scale study of Newark by the Essex County Jewish Community Council. Previous estimates of the population of Newark had shown extraordinary variations. In 1918 it was estimated there were 55,000 Jews in Newark, and in 1922 and again in 1925 the Jewish population was estimated as between 65,000 and 75,000; but in 1937 the Yom Kippur method showed a drop to 52,000, in 1944 another drop to 42,000. Could the Jewish population of Newark have dropped almost 50 per cent in twenty years, or was this striking decline caused by the different methods that had been used to estimate the population?

The study began with a master list of approximately twenty thousand names. A sample of 2900 was then set up on the following basis: in those election districts which had the densest Jewish population, one in thirty households was selected, and the proportion selected rose until in the districts which had the fewest Jews every household was included. The master list was checked for accuracy against the names listed in the city directory, and it was discovered that six per cent of the Jewish families in the most populated districts, and sixty per cent in the least populated, were not covered in the list. More households were then added to the sample, and detailed population statistics for the estimated 56,800 Jews in Newark were built up on the basis of interviews with the augmented sample.

There are three limiting factors in the procedure followed, according to Philip Hauser, formerly of the Census Bureau: (1) the preliminary determination that Newark proper should have two-thirds of the sample, based on previous estimates of the relative distribution of Jews in Newark and its suburbs; (2) the effect of the "not-at-homes" in the interviewing was not mathematically accounted for; and (3) the sample was chosen from the master list rather than from a complete canvass of all households in areas chosen at random from all those in the city. Nevertheless, this study represents the best that has as yet been done, and Newark is now the only city for which detailed data on the Jewish population is available by small areas for planning purposes.

What then can we say about American Jewish population? It is clear everything we say must be tentative. We must put together the results of many studies, conducted from very different presuppositions: in some cases, a Jew is defined as a person whose death certificate shows he was buried by a Jewish undertaking firm, in others it is a person with a Jewish name, in others it is a person absent from school on Yom Kippur. Sometimes the Jew is a person who has contributed to a Jewish organization, or who, when interviewed, is willing to identify himself as Jewish. Counting Jews is not like counting Chinese, who are easily identifiable in a population.

With all these qualifications, the figures for twelve hundred communities in the 1948 *American Jewish Year Book* suggest that the total is much less than five million, and may not exceed four million. It is probably fair to say that these figures have been more systematically and carefully compiled than the 1937 series in the *American Jewish Year Book.* It seems clear that in many instances the 1937 estimates were exaggerated.

However, while we cannot be certain about just how many Jews there are in the country, we can be pretty sure about some of the characteristics of this population, whatever its size, largely on the basis of detailed studies of selected communities. We know something about its distribution as between rural and urban areas; the occupations in which it is concentrated; the proportion of foreign-born among it; and its distribution by age. And this type of information permits us to make a pretty sound guess as to the future growth or decline of American Jewish population. Let us examine each of these four indexes of the Jewish demographic future.

Urban-Rural Distribution: Although there are Jews in every one of the forty-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

eight states, and in a little more than one-third of the 3600 incorporated places with a population of more than 2500, probably more than half of all the Jews in the United States live in New York State. If we list the thirteen cities with more than forty thousand Jews,* we will discover that while they contain five-sevenths of the estimated Jewish population, they include only one-seventh of the total American population. The five cities in the United States with populations of one million or more—New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, and Detroit—account for approximately one-eighth of the total population, but for about six-eighths of the Jewish population.

Average family size, the annual birth rate, the number of children borne by a woman in her lifetime—all these indexes related to population growth are far smaller for urban populations than for rural. So the predominantly urban way of life of the Jews in the United States suggests the prevalence of small rather than of large families among Jews.

Our figures do not however tell the whole story. In the seven states which account for almost nine-tenths of the total Jewish population—New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Illinois, Ohio, Michigan, and California—many of the small Jewish communities are in no sense rural but are rather suburban extensions of the large communities. It might be argued that the conditions of suburban life favor larger families, and fortunately the Newark survey supplies some evidence on this point. In the Jewish population of Essex county, the proportion of children under five is 11 per cent in the suburbs, 8 per cent in Newark as a whole, and only 5 per cent in ward three, the old center of Jewish population. However, this larger proportion of young children in the suburbs may say nothing about the size of *completed* families—which will determine the populations of the future—since the suburban population contains a higher proportion of young couples: only 43 per cent have been married twenty years or more, as against 60 per cent in Newark. It also reflects the rise in birth rates following a war, and this increase, it has been suggested, may only fill in the gaps in population created by the war, and does not portend a radical change in ultimate family size: "A change in the rate at which people are having children in a given year can no longer be taken as an indication of a change in the number of children they will bear altogether in the course of their reproductive lives." (J. Hajnal, "The Analysis of Birth Statistics in the Light of the Recent International Recovery of the Birthrate," *Population Studies*, September 1947.)

In February 1949, the New York City Board of Education released a study which indicated a rising birth rate and a shifting population, and which called for a vast school building program in New York City in the next six years: but on analysis, it is clear that the emergency cannot be explained by an increase in the number of Jewish children in New York City. It is caused by the migration of families with high child-adult ratios into New York City, chiefly from the South and from Puerto Rico, and by the migration of New Yorkers to the periphery of the city, to certain reclaimed areas, and to the suburbs. The new congregations on Long Island and in Westchester County suggest that a large portion of the migrants from Manhattan, the Bronx, and Brooklyn are Jews, but these are persons largely drawn from the top quarter

*Cities with Estimated Jewish Populations of 40,000 and Over
Ranked by Size of Jewish Population

City	Estimated Jewish Population 1948	Total Population 1940 (Rounded)	Percentage of Jews
New York	2,000,000	7,500,000	28
Chicago	300,000	3,396,000	8.8
Philadelphia	245,000	1,931,000	12.7
Los Angeles	225,000	1,504,000	15
Boston	137,000	771,000	17
Detroit	90,000	1,623,000	5.5
Cleveland	80,000	878,000	9.1
Baltimore	75,000	859,000	8
Newark	56,800	430,000	13
Pittsburgh	54,000	671,600	8
San Francisco	50,000	634,000	8
St. Louis	44,000	816,000	5.4
Miami	40,000	172,000	24

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of the income group, and we cannot expect large families from them.

There remain five hundred small Jewish communities located at a considerable distance from big towns. North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia, for example, are dotted with tiny communities of less than one hundred Jews each. In the course of their canvass of the Atlantic seaboard for funds and members, the national Jewish organizations are in touch with the smallest of these towns. But even if an equally diligent search revealed small settlements of Jews in other more remote sections of the country, their net effect on the total Jewish population, either now or in the future, would be negligible. In any case, it is most unlikely they are characterized by a high rate of increase. Residence in these small communities is apt to mean, for Jews, fewer available marriage partners, more intermarriage, and smaller families.

Thus, unlike the situation for the general population, in which a high rural birth rate offsets the decline in urban family size, the number of Jews in rural areas is an infinitesimal portion of the total Jewish population. They can hardly be counted upon to replenish the losses resulting from the decreasing family size of the Jews in the larger communities, even if the satellite suburban Jewish family does increase somewhat in size.

OCCUPATION: Students of population have established a close correlation between family size and occupational class. Partly because of higher age at marriage for professional persons, and partly because advancement in business makes heavy financial demands, the families of business and professional men are smaller than those of unskilled workers or farm laborers. While it is not easy to compare Jewish occupational distribution with that of the general population, because of the differences in definition and the time which has elapsed since the nearest census, for each of the cities for which we have detailed data there are similarities in the occupational distribution of Jews and striking differences with the general population. These differences appear in spite of the very different techniques used.

The most striking Jewish occupational characteristic is the concentration in retail trade, which includes 43 per cent of the Jews in Passaic and as much as 60 per cent in Pittsburgh, in comparison with a figure of 16.7 per cent for the country as a whole in 1940.

A second, less striking difference is the Jewish clustering in the professions. In 1940, the professions accounted for slightly less than seven per cent of Americans gainfully occupied. The percentages of gainfully occupied Jews in the professions were estimated as 7.7 in Cleveland in 1940, 7.4 in New York in 1935, 8.8 in Chicago in 1930, 9.5 in Pittsburgh in 1938, and approximately 12 per cent in Trenton, Passaic, Stamford, and New Orleans in the 1930's, and about 14 per cent in New London in 1938. Within the professions, Jews concentrate in medicine and in law, which together account for from one-third (in San Francisco) to two-thirds (in Boston) of all the Jews in professions.

Consistent with this predominance in the professions and in wholesale and retail trades is the large proportion of self-employed in the Jewish group—38 per cent—in comparison with about 19 per cent in the general population.

The proportion of gainfully employed Jews in the skilled occupations is nowhere near that of the total population. There are relatively few Jews in the manufacturing and mechanical industries: the proportion varies from 11 per cent in Dallas and Trenton to 27 per cent in Detroit. In the New York City study of families with young persons between the ages of 16 and 24 in 1935, only three per cent of the Jewish youths were children of unskilled workers, in comparison with 18 per cent in the non-Jewish families. Clerks and kindred workers, on the other hand, composed about 40 per cent of the gainfully occupied Jews in Pittsburgh, Detroit, and San Francisco, in the 30's, while in the general population in 1940, they accounted for about one-fifth of those gainfully employed.

Unfortunately, we have no data for Jews alone relating family size to the occupation of the head of the family. For the general urban native white population in 1940, however, we have figures for the number of children under five per thousand married women aged fifteen through forty-nine, classified according to the occupations of their husbands. For the occupational groups in which Jews are most frequently found—proprietors, managers, and officials; professional and semi-professional; and clerical, sales, and the like—the figures are 305, 365, and 353. These contrast with 645 for farm laborers, 588 for other laborers, and 477 for operatives, (factory workers, draftsmen, etc.)—occupation groups in which Jews are infrequently classified.

Dr. Kingsley Davis (*Journal of Legal and Political Sociology*, April 1944) has suggested on

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the basis of the data in *Jewish Population Studies* that Jewish immigrants who came to America did not, like other immigrants, start as unskilled or semi-skilled laborers, but with trade. With income derived from this source, they educated their children for the professions. Success in trade thus furnished the basis for movement into still higher social strata. In common with all socially mobile persons, Jews are paying the price of low fertility.

PROPORTION OF FOREIGN BORN: Family size is related not only to occupation and residence in urban as opposed to rural areas, but also to foreign as against native birth.

In the cities for which we have details, a little more than one-third of the Jewish population is foreign-born. The small proportion of Jewish foreign-born in New Orleans—twenty per cent—is evidence that it has not been the destination of immigrants among the Jews, or among others, for that matter, for some decades. In contrast, Passaic and its silk mills have attracted Jews from among the more recent immigrants, and 40 per cent of its Jewish population was foreign-born in 1937.

Some evidence on the relation between family size and nativity of parents is presented by Dr. Nathan Goldberg in *The Jewish People: Past and Present*, Vol. II, 1948. Dr. Goldberg's chief contribution to the study of Jewish demography has been his wide use of the figures on "mother tongue"—the language spoken in the home in earliest childhood—which are gathered by the census. One and three-quarter million persons reported Yiddish as their mother tongue in 1940. These figures have not been made use of by students of Jewish demography, perhaps because they are considered to be badly reported, but Dr. Goldberg draws interesting testimony from them.

The census compares the birth rates and average number of children of Yiddish-speaking mothers born in Russia and Poland with those of American-born mothers. Dr. Goldberg shows from this material that the average immigrant Jewish mother under forty-five years of age had fewer children than the average American-born white mother and than the average non-Jewish foreign-born mother, and that while the older mothers in general had had more children than younger mothers, the decline by age-groups was greater among immigrant Jewish women than it was among American-born white women.

Similar testimony is given for five cities in *Jewish Population Studies* that native-born Jews have smaller families than the foreign-born:

MEDIAN NUMBER OF CHILDREN BY PARENTAGE FOR NATIVE AND FOREIGN-BORN JEWISH MOTHERS

City	*Foreign-Born*	*Native-Born*
Buffalo	3.4	2.2
Minneapolis	1.5	0.3
New London	3.1	1.5
Passaic	2.1	1.5
Trenton	2.1	1.6

So from this source too we see little hope for an increase in Jewish population.

PROPORTION OF CHILDREN: The most direct evidence for use in predicting the future of the Jewish population in America is its present age composition. Birth rates may be deceptive; but if there is a high proportion of young people in the population, we have the best possible evidence for future growth. Now the age structure of the populations in the several cities studied reveals progressively smaller proportions of Jewish children in the younger age groups.

The story for Minneapolis, Pittsburgh, and Cincinnati is as follows:

PROPORTION OF THE TOTAL JEWISH POPULATION IN EACH AGE GROUP

	Under 5	5-9	10-14	15-19	20-24
Minneapolis	5.4	7.1	8.9	10.7	11.3
Pittsburgh	5.3	6.4	8.9	10	9.9
Cincinnati	3.8	6.1	7.3	8	9.7

The successively smaller proportions in each younger age group mean a smaller reservoir for replenishing the Jewish population in each succeeding decade.

The proportions of the total Jewish population under twenty years of age vary from as little as 22 per cent in San Francisco to as much as 34.9 in Detroit. In Boston, Buffalo, and Chicago, the proportions under twenty years of age were also approximately one-third. There is rather less difference in the cities studied in the proportion of the total Jewish population in the twenty-year span from 25 to 45. This accounts roughly for one-third of the total. Since this group, the present reproducing population, is as large as the group under twenty, it suggests that the American Jews of tomorrow will be about or almost as numerous as those of today. There is no broad base in the younger age groups to provide the reservoir for replenishing the present Jewish population in the United States as it grows older. This was also the conclusion L. Hersch came to when he examined the state of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Jewish population in Europe ("The Downward Trend of Jewish Population," *Commentary*, February 1949).

Our examination of the data in four areas has left room for only one conclusion. But no demographer could make an unqualified prediction of the future level of population, particularly in the case of a group so subject to special developments as the Jews. Conceivably, Jewish population may decline more rapidly than we have suggested because of increases in birth control, intermarriage, conversion, and more intense urbanization. On the other hand, it is possible other factors will operate to reverse the trends that now indicate the decline of Jewish population. Perhaps the continuance of relatively full employment, the lowering of the age at marriage, and other factors that have led to the striking increase in the American population since the last census may operate to as good effect on the Jews; we have no way of knowing whether this is happening.

Perhaps completely new factors may affect Jewish population growth: for example, if the economic state of the Jews continues as favorable as it has been, and is accompanied by decentralization and suburban residence, the fall in the birth rate may be reversed: surburbanization may be more favorable to the birth rate than urbanization. And then there are such intangible cultural factors as the desire to make up for the losses of the recent war; the stimulus provided by the establishment of the Jewish state; the recent development of a heightened self-consciousness among American Jews, and perhaps of a greater sense of security in America; all of which might help to increase the number of Jewish births.

In this uncertain and somewhat unsatisfactory state we must leave the discussion of American Jewish population. We must assume that the actual canvass of the Jews by the Census Bureau is out of the question politically—for, whatever its value for Jewish scholars or even the work of Jewish organizations, these same organizations would probably fight fiercely to scotch any effort to include a question on religion in the census, and no one else has any particular interest in including such a question. So it does not seem likely that we will be able to be more definite about this question for some time to come.

However, the present situation is not without possibility of some improvement. The wasteful and costly separate, independent, and non-comparable surveys of towns here and there could be replaced by one survey properly planned, and organized so as to ensure the comparability of results. A number of Jewish organizations have recently set up a Bureau of Jewish Demography to pool all the resources available for Jewish demographic investigations. Perhaps this organization may be able to establish such a voluntary, regular, survey— a "census" would be far beyond the powers of any private group. If it can, it would substantially help Jewish communal planning, and permit a level of sociological self-understanding that is at present unattainable for American Jews.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

LETTERS FROM READERS

Morris Cohen as Talmid Chacham

To the Editor of Commentary:

Israel Knox, in reviewing Morris Cohen's diary-autobiography *A Dreamer's Journey* (in the June Commentary), seems to be drawing a slightly far-fetched and more than slightly irrelevant analogy throughout between Morris Cohen and the *talmid chacham* of Jewish tradition. What is more, it is even a somewhat irreverent analogy. Cohen was a Jew in name only—and that because he had too much intellectual honesty to accept the name of another religion in which he had equal disbelief (in religion, as he himself puts it, he looked "benevolently" upon polytheism, and in practice he abandoned all observance of any religious ritual, except those he maintained for purely sentimental reasons), but not enough intellectual honesty to examine the basis for his rejection of his religion.

To call him a Jewish "culture hero," aside from the unpleasant associations of the term *Kultus-hero,* is invidious both to Cohen and to Jewish culture; to write that "he approximates as *no other Jew in America* has [my own italics], the superb tradition of the *talmid chacham,* the devoted lover of *torah le-shmo,* of truth for its own sake," is pure nonsense. It disparages all primarily Jewish scholarship in America, from which there has been enough significant contribution made to permit the name.

The interest of Cohen's book lies in its sincerity and its honesty. It is an appealing work but at the same time it is an irritating one. It is addressed, as Cohen wrote in a letter to his son, to a generation ignorant of a tradition and a way of life upon which Cohen looks back with longing and respect. Alas, your reviewer also belongs to a generation which knows not Joseph. For while "learning, not merely literacy" was in truth "ubiquitous and pervasive" in the ghettos of Eastern Europe, *A Dreamer's Journey* hardly offers confirmation of the fact. The Farfels and the Cohens may have been hardworking people with a sincere respect for the Torah as they understood it and a genuine reverence for learning, but they were not learned. Cohen's paternal grandfather, briefly mentioned (p. 6), read Psalms during those times when he could find no work as a tailor. (There is, incidentally, a well-known Yiddish phrase, *tehillim zager,* which is used to describe the pious Jew who has neither the ability nor the knowledge required for the study of the Talmud.) The education of his son (Cohen's father) "could not have been a prolonged one" (p. 7), and his position as tutor to the children of Jewish farmers he owed "perhaps even more to his great abilities as a general handy man." Cohen's maternal grandfather, with whom he lived three years in Neshwies, had "some scholarly pretensions" (p. 11). It was from him that he "first heard of Aristotle as well as Maimonides, and of Napoleon's campaign in Russia, of which some monuments in the form of earthworks were still visible outside of the town" (p. 33). This is what seems almost incredible to your reviewer, who has got the impression that these were necessarily topics for discussion. I need hardly point out that no Jew, no matter how ignorant of his works, was ignorant of the existence of the Rambam, and that the name of Aristotle had long before worked its way into the homely Yiddish vocabulary. His grandfather, Cohen tells us in the most illuminating anecdote of all, "developed considerable pride when I began to distinguish myself in my Hebrew studies." The boy, then eight years of age, asked his *rebbe* "why Laban is called a son of Nahor (Gen. 29:5) when he had previously been referred to as a grandson" (p. 29). The fact that his grandfather "boasted" about this unremarkable observation "all over town even in my own hearing" speaks eloquently for itself.

Most significant, however, of Cohen's lack of scholarly background and of his own disinclination towards his religion, is the episode which led the young Cohen to abandon Orthodoxy and subsequently Judaism. At the age of twelve, he reports, he overheard a conversation between his father and a certain Mr. Tunick. "Our visitor," he writes, "challenged my father to prove that there was a personal God who could be influenced by human prayers or deeds, or that the Jewish religion had any more evidence in favor of its truth than other religions. To this challenge, my father could only answer, 'I am a believer.' This did not satisfy my own mind. And after some reflection I concluded

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

that in all my studies no such evidence was available. After that I saw no reason for prayer or the specifically Jewish religious observances. But there was no use arguing with my father. He insisted that . . . I must say my prayers regularly whether I believed in them or not. Such is the orthodox conception."

ASIDE from the fact that Orthodox Judaism has always made its primary reference to reason—Maimonides specifically tells us that we must accept nothing contrary to reason, and Bahya insists it is a duty incumbent upon everyone to make God an objective of speculative reason and knowledge, in order to arrive at true faith—the flaw in Cohen's ratiocination is that if he could not accept his father's statement, he should equally have been unable to accept the challenge, which was based on an equal lack of proof and an equal faith—that there was no God. In Morris Joseph's work, *Judaism as Creed and Life,* he points out that it is not only in "the domain of Religion that [the] exercise of faith is demanded. . . . The most determined champion of the materialistic theory fully acknowledges the fact, and is forced to admit that Science cannot, any more than Religion, pin itself down to absolutely demonstrable propositions."

In Cohen's own work, *Law and the Social Order,* he maintains ("Law and Scientific Method"): "The view that science can begin without ideas, hypotheses, or anticipations of nature and proceed first of all to gather the facts, is nothing less than silly. For what facts are we to gather as relevant for our inquiry? . . . I say we begin always with hypotheses or assumptions. . . . Scientific methodology has no objection to traditional views as such, except to warn us that as traditional views are fallible, the only way of getting at the truth is to treat them as among a number of possible views and compare them with others. This process may lead us in the end to maintain the established views as the best."

But what tests could a twelve-year-old apply, what references could he make that would lead him to a logical rejection of his religion—or indeed of all religion? Paradoxically enough, Cohen himself declares: "In matters on which it is . . . difficult to arrive at the truth, such as questions of religion, we are inclined to be very sure of ourselves. Perhaps we try to make up by our vehemence for the lack of demonstrative evidence."

ROSE ROSENSOHN JACOBS
East Orange, New Jersey

TO THE EDITOR OF COMMENTARY:

It appears that Mrs. Jacobs has taken my comments on Cohen as "standing in the tradition of the *talmid chacham*" quite literally. I wrote explicitly that "in the body of his work there is little that is directly concerned with Jewish thought or scholarship." In speaking of the *tradition* of the *talmid chacham,* I did not mean—as Mrs. Jacobs does—the student of Talmud or rabbinics, but the lover of knowledge for its own sake, the "disinterested" student of ideas, the person preoccupied with the values of the mind. In that sense, Cohen's right to the title is indisputable.

Again, in speaking of learning as ubiquitous in the ghettos of Eastern Europe I was thinking of the fact that all Jews could pray and understand the content of the Hebrew prayers, could read the Bible, knew portions of the Prophets and the Psalms by heart, could follow simple commentaries on the Bible and Talmud, and that many had a nodding acquaintance with Maimonides. And there was an all-pervasive respect for learning and the learned, even on the part of those who could boast of little of either in their families. In what other communities was this to be found?

The core of our disagreement is that Mrs. Jacobs would place within the "superb tradition of the *talmid chacham*" only those men who accepted traditional Judaism or concerned themselves with specifically Jewish scholarship. To my mind, some of the greatest exemplars of that tradition are to be found among the thinkers, scientists, and artists who made their contributions in the general culture; and, it should be noted, in modern times the generality of Jews make little distinction in the respect and honor they accord intellectual achievement and learning, whether exercised in "Jewish fields" or "outside."

ISRAEL KNOX
New York City

Not Bronx, but America

TO THE EDITOR OF COMMENTARY:

The honesty and charm of Ruth Glazer's observations of life in the West Bronx [in the June COMMENTARY] have surely delighted many readers. They were marred for me, however, by a few misconceptions which I think should be considered if Mrs. Glazer's informal sociology is to provide proper perspective as well as enjoyable reading. . . .

The points I should like to make are that the abundance and opulence of the West Bronx are not unique, in that they are not limited to the environs of the Grand Concourse; and that they are also not even a product of this amazing neighborhood, which is, however, an unusually pure example of what we might,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

for lack of a better name, consider the West Bronx state of mind.

Just a few places where you can find West Bronx tastes and interests flourishing in varying amounts of strength, depending on the economic status of the community, are the Jewish neighborhoods of Brooklyn, such as East Flatbush, Borough Park—even lowly Williamsburg has its hopefuls. And in Manhattan from the tenements of the lower East Side to the penthouses near Central Park, the pattern and the goals, regardless of their fruition, are the same. There are the butchers, the bakeries, with a little more or less whipped cream, the hardware stores, and most of all the people. You can see on Eastern Parkway, on Kings Highway, and on Clinton Street the same platform shoes, the pompadours, the silver fox jackets in mid-July, the oversized alligator pocketbooks. There are everywhere, if you look, the well-dressed, perfumed women and the fat meek husbands, and many reasonable facsimiles thereof in cheaper imitations. Come to Boston, and the West Bronx seems to have radiated its spell over the entire suburb of Brookline. You go as far as Denver to be intimidated by what appears to be a twin brother of the butcher who bossed and bullied you on Sutter Avenue in Brownsville. And you come to Rochester, New York, whose entire Jewish population would hardly make a splash in the Bronx, and find the very same living pattern. The persistent concentration on "having," rather than "being" or "doing," is still the driving force. . . .

When you see all this from afar—as well as from up close where you can hear it, taste it, smell it, and usually not think about it—it is very tempting to make some broad generalizations. First, that something important has happened to our second generation of American Jews. Either the old intellectual values, the desire to learn and grow and understand, have been lost, or else they existed for only a few in former generations, too. Certainly the intellectual minorities are smug and lonely groups wherever you find them. Secondly, if the West Bronx state of mind, or sense of values, if you prefer, is so common, isn't it possible that it is the product of something much larger? Perhaps the West Bronx, wherever it happens to be, is merely a Jewish reflection of the materialistic, immature American community that hasn't yet figured out what to do with itself and doesn't know what is expected of it. Might we not find upon closer observation that the "handsome American families" that Mrs. Glazer feels have fuller lives are not as different as the magazine ads lead us to think? Perhaps they too don't do all the things they might, and perhaps the greater number of people everywhere live as busily, as uncritically, as our West Bronx friends.

SYLVIA H. ROTHCHILD
Boston, Massachusetts

Questioning Liberal Assumptions

TO THE EDITOR OF COMMENTARY:

I have been reading COMMENTARY for the past two years and consider it the most stimulating monthly in America. Naturally I have disagreed with some of your contributors, especially with those who confuse Jewish chauvinism with cultural pluralism, but I have been most impressed with the seriousness and depth of the questions which you have raised and have attempted to answer. The high literary quality of your journal is especially to be admired.

While I have no favorite writer I am attracted most to the articles and reviews of Oscar Handlin. Mr. Handlin is the rare type of scholar who combines learning with a practical kind of idealism and loads of common sense. His review of Richard Hofstadter's *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* in the July issue of COMMENTARY is a case in point. His criticism of progressive historiography was much needed. Today when liberals are beginning to question their assumptions it is necessary that they first question the history that nourished their convictions.

What Professor Handlin neglected to say was that in his monograph, *Commonwealth,* he has explained at least part of the American political tradition. I was much indebted to his volume when I reviewed Hofstadter's work in the Spring issue of the *William and Mary Quarterly.* Oscar Handlin contends, and has a wealth of material to support his thesis, that before the Civil War the state governments exercised great control over the economy. This control was significant because the economy before 1865 was local and regional in character and not national. Professor Perry Miller has properly noted that Mr. Handlin's book will make us re-think the usual notions we have about laisser faire in America.

COMMENTARY can be of service to thinking people in America if it continues the high level of performance thus achieved.

ARTHUR MANN
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Cambridge, Massachusetts

Sociologists and Religion

TO THE EDITOR OF COMMENTARY:

Though I am not a sociologist myself and my field of study is somewhat remote from sociol-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ogy, I have been most deeply impressed by Albert Salomon's article "Prophets, Priests, and Social Scientists," published in the June COMMENTARY. It is the first paper by a sociologist in a very long time which takes the phenomenon of religion seriously—for what it is and has been in historical reality. The insistence on the intrinsic nature of religion, the approach towards the core and center and not towards the margin, are really refreshing in a time like this, when it is almost universally taken for granted that religion is but a curious phenomenon to be explained by and reduced to psychological factors and social forces. By taking religion for that which it is as long as it is a living force, Professor Salomon has done justice to his subject matter. Such is the duty of every writer on religion, regardless of whether or not he is a believer himself. Most illuminating are also his discussions of the origin of sociology and of the latter as an "earthly religion." It is very gratifying to see the complex and complicated relations between religion and sociology discussed under that broad perspective.

I also read with great interest the article by Arnold W. Green. The author has pointed out, pertinently and adequately, the sore spots in "higher education."

ARON GURWITSCH

Brandeis University
Waltham, Massachusetts

Jewish Labor and Management

TO THE EDITOR OF COMMENTARY:

You provoke me to most unprofessional conduct—the writing of a letter to the editor. I do so with a sense of pleasant irritation, the urticant being a well established reluctance to undertake the effort of writing, the counter-irritant being an inner compulsion to express my appreciation of and gratitude for the superb job of editing and writing exemplified by the July issue of COMMENTARY.

As an editor in my own small right, I doubt that there is a sufficient audience of readers ready to invest the mental and spiritual labor required by Elliot Cohen's essay, "The Intellectuals and the Jewish Community," and perhaps, also, by Mr. Rosenberg's "The Communist." As a reader, I freely offer testimony that the investment will bring rich rewards.

There is not another journal of general circulation which can boast of two such meaty and thought-provoking contributions in the same issue. In addition, the July COMMENTARY offers bonuses in the form of articles of information, edification, and pleasant diversion which are top-notch by any standards. I was particularly entertained by the amusing "Revolt of the Reefer-Makers" by S. L. Blumenson, a piece right down my own alley. It has always seemed curious to me how Jewish labor and Jewish management have arrived not merely at a *modus vivendi* but even a norm of affectionate regard for one another, and Mr. Blumenson's piece spices that curiosity with humorous recollections of early days on the *Jewish Daily Forward,* my journalistic Alma Mater.

J. C. RICH
Editor

The Hat Worker
New York City

No Whitewash Brush

TO THE EDITOR OF COMMENTARY:

In the process of cleaning up my desk, I saw a reprint from COMMENTARY ("Good Stocks and Lesser Breeds") that I have been passing on to some of my friends and it occurred to me that it was about time that I wrote to thank you for the contribution that COMMENTARY has made to me and to American intellectual life.

COMMENTARY is no whitewash brush. It reveals a variety of facets of Jewish life in a way that no other publication does. The quality of the articles is high and it has been uniformly maintained from the first copy to the most recent—and, incidentally, I've read every one.

I am struck, too, by the variety of places where I find COMMENTARY. I see it in the libraries of homes where I would not expect to see it, finding its way there either by subscription or having been passed on by friends.

I hope no one minimizes the influence it will have upon thinking in America, for essentially it is a magazine for thinking people. I would like to see it have greater circulation but I would not underestimate the effectiveness of its current circulation because I think it reaches people who are opinion-makers.

More power to you and the publication.

MARK A. MCCLOSKEY
Director

Division of Community Education
Board of Education
New York City

A Correction

IN Diana Trilling's review of James Bryant Conant's *Education in a Divided World,* in the July COMMENTARY, the word "not" was omitted from a sentence occurring near the end of page 91. The correct sentence is as follows: "But in pressing Mr. Conant to confront the impasse to which he has been led, I do not mean to insist, as on my own part, that socialism is our only immediate alternative."—ED.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

BOOKS IN REVIEW

Naturalist in Extremis

THE ROAD BETWEEN. By JAMES T. FARRELL. Vanguard Press. 463 pp. $3.50.

Reviewed by WALLACE MARKFIELD

IN THE minds of so many intellectuals who have passed thirty, James T. Farrell's *Studs Lonigan* trilogy evokes a sentiment close to nostalgia. To recall the impact of these books is to recall how far off the 30's really are. Today Studs has been more or less reshaped into the familiar juvenile delinquent of Hollywood, but at that time the very discovery of his existence was a shocking emotional experience. It was *the* novel of the depression, and the death of Studs seemed to have the finality of an era being closed. Against this achievement, the carping of a few critics and academicians appeared irrelevant. After all, as John Chamberlain asked in his introduction to the Modern Library edition, "What the hell is art anyway?"

Despite the almost universal acclaim the book received, there was a general hope that Farrell would move out to encompass a larger world in his future work. Lewis Corey predicted more than ten years ago, after the Danny O'Neill series began, that ". . . there will be more expressionism and interpretation in his writing and his realism will become more creative while retaining all its honesty and power." Such a development has not taken place.

Seen in retrospect, Farrell's novels take the form of a sermon that intones the horror of mankind's inadequacy in the face of forces it scarcely comprehends. Society is presented as an overpowering monster which stifles all expression of the human consciousness. Emotionally paralyzed, Farrell's people live in a preconscious zone of American life, able to reach a fragmented sensitivity only with the approach of death. The stern moral tone never leaves his work—for Studs the wages of sin are death, for Danny O'Neill or Bernard Carr there is only a constant pervading anger at having been expelled from the womb into a world where God does not exist. This anger has been sustained through a period of activity that extends from the jazz age to the icy 40's.

Farrell today is the naturalist *in extremis*, smothering in the mass of data he must record. Like the hero of one of his early stories, "The Open Road," he seems to feel ". . . afraid, because some day he was going to die, and until he was going to die he was going to go on sensing, seeing other people, seeing them flounder and blunder and suffer like himself, seeing them hungry and poor. . . ." This is the heavy gloom that muffles the perceptions of his characters, clogs their consciousness, and makes every observation painful, banal. Even his autobiographical heroes, who have liberated themselves from their environment, cannot escape this sense of strangulation. Like Farrell himself, they seem never to be sure of themselves as intellectuals, and their attempts at self-affirmation emerge in gasps. "Jesus Christ," thought Bernard Clare, "how he wanted to be a writer!"

THE ROAD BETWEEN takes the already familiar form of the urban *Erziehungsroman*. Bernard Carr walks the streets of the city, uncertain of himself, of his origin, less a character than an agglomerative mass of raw material. His every reaction, every piece of introspection and soul-searching, has reference only to the immediate situation in which he finds himself: if he despises literary Philistines, it is after an interview with an editor; if he is uncertain in his feelings towards his wife, it is after she has humiliated him at a party; if he thinks of failure, it is after meeting a Bohemian poseur. His mind remains always immersed in the mere physical scene—which sometimes, indeed, lends a certain vigor to the writing, but a vigor that continually degenerates into banality; thus: "One pair of lips to kiss . . . one pair of eyes to look at him with love . . . one vagina. This is what lay behind all those recurrent moods of brooding and melancholy and Zarathustrian loneliness."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Circling the edge of the Communist movement, Bernard marches on May Day, attends fund-raising parties, discusses proletarian literature, compares the sex habits of the radical Jewish female with those of the *shiksa*. Anyone who has been involved even peripherally with Stalinism will recognize the accuracy of Farrell's monotone observations. And yet somehow the facts he presents never seem precisely relevant. The hoarse street-corner speakers, the young militants beating up Trotskyites, the charge of mounted police—it all seems true, but only if one relies on one's own memory to fill the gaps. In the end, there seems little difference between the Farrell of the 30's and the Farrell of today: he still outlines his world in the same schematized manner, leaving no room for wit or ambiguity or complexity. What once had relevance in his earlier work must be used again and again to exhaustion. It is interesting to note, for example, how closely his portrayal of Communist party types follows his treatment of the South Side gang: cocktails are substituted for Prohibition gin, and the boys are not so rough, but there are the same roisterers, cuckolds, drunkards, and nymphomaniacs.

When Bernard returns to Chicago for his father's funeral, Farrell is at his best, for he is back in familiar territory. The motif is death and decay, Bernard's dead father juxtaposed with his father-in-law, the most original creation of the novel, whose undertaking parlor colors his personality with a pervasive necrophilia. There is scarcely a character not loaded with the impending sense of death: Bernard at his writing desk shudders at the vision of himself lying in a white coffin; his brother remembers the agony of their father, feels his own body borne along in the hearse; his mother embraces the Church and the Saviour — all under the same sweet, sickly, odorous pall.

Despite the lameness of his prose, Farrell can still carry off these episodes with flashes of his old power. This is the same material which once pressed urgently for release in *Studs Lonigan,* when Danny O'Neill thought that some day he ". . . would drive this neighborhood and all his memories of it out of his consciousness with a book. . . ." The force of Farrell's early anger defied all constriction; the Babbitts, pimps, drugstore cowboys came through because the waste and loss of their lives was so clearly realized. But in *The Road Between,* it is as if this anger had spent itself upon his youth, and Farrell ends up seeking a sentimental unity with the proletarian orthodoxy he has intellectually rejected.

Emerging from the funeral parlor where his father's body lies, Bernard encounters a young Polish steel-worker with whom he attended grammar school. The conversation that ensues is pitiful in its intended warmth and resultant unintended self-satire — "Communists? But they're bad. My fadder, Bernie, he loved America. He always say dis to me when I was a kid. He work hard. I work hard. He said to me America is a good country—'Steve, it's your country.'" The trouble is that Farrell is here being deadly serious.

The rugged honesty with which Farrell pursues his sociological summaries lends a certain pathos to his work, as though one were watching the struggles of a man filled with ideas but unable to verbalize them. American life becomes a "broken promise," parenthood a "common human experience." At the end, after Bernard's baby has died at birth ("It's merely part of the biological waste of life. . . ."), he stands near Fourteenth Street, observing a policeman who is stationed next to a bank shut down by the Bank Holiday. "America, he thought, had become one common fear, one common anxiety, one common paralysis."

This is the height of awareness, beyond this he does not proceed. The American myth is gone, but what has it masked, what lies beyond it? Bernard is off to Paris on a fellowship, imbued, strangely enough, with a new hope for American life — a hope that is less relevant to the novel than to Farrell's recent speeches in Paris. We are presented with Bernard's emancipation when in reality the conflict has not even begun.

The Church and American Politics

American Freedom and Catholic Power. By Paul Blanshard. The Beacon Press. $3.50.

Reviewed by Will Herberg

"Catholic power" is certainly a problem for American democracy. It constitutes a problem in the sense in which every potent special-interest group makes the workings of democratic government more complex. But beyond that,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

it raises a difficulty because the political and social aims pursued by the Catholic Church in some ways run counter to what most Americans have held to be the very foundation of their democratic way of life. The claims and pretensions of the Church to legal primacy, if not monopoly, in religion, education, and family relations, are felt to be definitely incompatible with the liberal, pluralistic foundations of American democracy. These claims have not been and are not being pushed in this country, but they have not been abandoned and they may become a matter of practical concern at any time. Equally disturbing is the Church's tendency to confuse, or rather to equate, the spiritual interests of Christianity with the political and social, even economic, interests of the Vatican, the hierarchy, and the Church establishment. A careful study of the Catholic Church as a social power, or an analysis of its doctrines that would scrupulously avoid bias and distortion, could serve a very useful purpose. Unfortunately, Mr. Blanshard's book, which is a much-expanded revision of the famous *Nation* articles, does not meet this requirement.

Not that Mr. Blanshard's writing is not informative or well documented. It is both, and everyone can gain a great deal from a critical reading of the book. But the reading will have to be critical indeed if it is not to mislead. For Mr. Blanshard's work, however accurate the footnotes and documentation, is permeated with anti-Catholic bias and is vitiated by a secularist-statist philosophy that, in this reviewer's opinion at least, is far more dangerous than anything in American Catholicism to which the book calls attention.

The anti-Catholic bias, despite repeated and no doubt sincere disavowals, is pervasive and often quite offensive. What is it but vulgar anti-Catholicism to sneer "at the whole segregated system of nuns, wimples and convents" as "medieval posturing and useless mortifications" (page 287)? What is it but vulgar anti-Catholicism to ridicule the very names of Catholic religious institutions—"The Sisters of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd" is Mr. Blanshard's prize exhibit—as reflecting "a medieval attitude of piety and feminine subordination" somehow incompatible with the robust spirit of American democracy?

Mr. Blanshard conscientiously covers the entire field of Catholic activity in the United State—the workings of the hierarchy; the position of the Church on democracy, fascism, Communism, and labor; Catholic policy on education, sex, marriage, and divorce; Catholic activities in censoring literature and films; the Catholic attitude to science and scholarship; and Catholic views on many other matters relating to American life. In every case, he finds the Church a distinct menace to American freedom. Indeed, the penultimate chapter of the book ("The Catholic Plan for America") is a horrendous picture of what might be expected to happen to our democracy should Catholics ever come to attain majority control. A good deal of what Mr. Blanshard tells us and many of the dangers he warns against are certainly worthy of note. But our confidence in his findings and, above all, in his conclusions is greatly shaken by a certain feeling that the author is not quite candid with us, or perhaps, for that matter, with himself. There is an air of such calculated special pleading, of such arguing for effect rather than for the balanced truth, that it is really difficult to know how far one may safely follow Mr. Blanshard in his indictment of the Catholic Church. Perhaps some examples will illustrate what I mean.

He calls (page 255) the French Catholic MRP an "antisocialist political party" despite the fact that its program is well known to be modelled after that of the British Labor party. He repeats (page 299) the familiar charge that Catholics hold that "non-Catholics who deliberately reject Catholicism are headed for Hell," when he is aware or ought to be aware that the phrase "deliberately reject" is officially understood in such a way as not to mean this at all. He goes into great detail (chapter 11) describing the Vatican's rapprochement with the fascist regimes of Italy and Spain but has not a word to say about the same Vatican's impressive efforts on behalf of the Jews during the Hitler terror.

Mr. Blanshard does not hesitate (page 301) to call the Catholic Church anti-Semitic on the ground that "the hierarchy teaches Catholic children (1) that they should not marry Jews; (2) that they should not go to school with Jews in a neutral atmosphere; and (3) that they must not read any Jewish literature that states the case for Jewish as against Catholic faith," without suggesting that these same tests, particularly the first, would expose most believing Jews and very many believing Protestants to condemnation as bigoted anti-Catholics. The last point, by the way, is a good example of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Mr. Blanshard's method. He knows—indeed, he points out—that the Catholic ban on intermarriage, secular education, and reading anti-Catholic literature is not in any way directed against the Jews but is quite general in its application. He is not content, however, to criticize such a policy for what it is; he must pretend it is anti-Semitism.

But the gravest fault in the Blanshard indictment of the Catholic Church is the studied ambiguity that pervades it. Is it to the Catholic belief, grounded in supernaturalism, that he is objecting, or to what he holds to be an improper use of such belief to advance the hierarchy's power interests? Is it, for example, the belief in miracles and the efficacy of relics that he finds objectionable, or the exploitation of this belief for political and financial purposes? He is never quite clear; he exposes the latter but also denounces the former. In his objections to Catholic supernaturalism, he displays a rather naive faith in what he takes to be the deliverances of science. He has a perfect right under the law to hold to this strange faith, but he has no right to identify it with democracy or to condemn anything that runs counter to it as a menace to American freedom. Or has scientism, in Mr. Blanshard's opinion, been enacted into the Constitution and made an official part of the "American way of life"?

Mr. Blanshard's prejudices make it impossible for him to appreciate the deep concern that many religious people feel about an allegedly "neutral" school system that in fact indoctrinates the child and young person with an outlook on life in which man is held to be sufficient unto himself and God is treated as an outmoded irrelevance. This secularism, linked to an exaltation of the "social-welfare state" as an omnicompetent agency for the total control of social life, prevents Mr. Blanshard from understanding how people may seriously insist that since social, family, and educational problems are at bottom moral, they cannot be separated from one's religious faith, and if that faith is institutionalized in that form, from one's church.

His perfervid nationalism and statism make it hard for him to grasp how any person genuinely devoted to democracy can nevertheless contend that there is a higher law in the name of which the dictates of the state may be disallowed if these dictates are felt to come into conflict with obedience to God. Mr. Blanshard excoriates (pages 52-53) the Catholics for affirming that they would disobey a law outlawing parochial schools and compelling parents to send their children to the public schools. He thinks such an attitude outrageously undemocratic and a menace to American freedom. To me, on the contrary, this attitude seems not only intelligible but thoroughly in line with the best of democratic tradition, which has always rejected the pretensions of the state to a monopoly of social and cultural life.

I am not asserting that the Catholic answer to any of these questions is the right one. In fact, I think it is often seriously wrong. But Mr. Blanshard, by his bias, has rendered himself incapable of understanding what is really involved in the vital problems he himself raises. That is why his book, for all its information and documentation, is ultimately so unsatisfactory.

The Judaism of Rabbi Baeck

The Essence of Judaism. By Leo Baeck. Revised Edition. Schocken Books. 288 pp. $4.00.

Reviewed by David Baumgardt

In studying great lives of the past, and in personal contacts with some men of genius of our time, I have encountered those who carry a heavy burden of moral responsibility, of intellectual or artistic subtlety, and who carry this burden often with difficulty and pain; but there seemed to me not too much space left for what can specifically be called dignity. There is certainly the appearance of marked dignity in some kings, princes, and—actors; yet in these cases, one generally feels that the dignity is only a matter of externals but does not attach to the core of the man. In Leo Baeck the pith of the man and the writer is dignity, Jewish dignity. As a host in his home, as a guest in other homes, as a preacher in his synagogue, and as the leader of German Jewry within Himmler's concentration camps, he is and has remained the shining incarnation of those rarest gifts: dignity coupled not with sternness but with radiant warmth. It is with this sense of the man in the background of one's mind that one reads this new edition of his *Essence of Judaism*.

Without emphasis on polemics, Baeck makes

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

alive a number of features by which Judaism distinguishes itself from other world religions. There is primarily the amazing lack of any dogma, of any fixed religious creed. In Judaism the stress is on human conduct, on the morality of action, and not at all on articles of faith, on the belief in certain definite, theologically correct tenets. The revolutionary teaching of Copernican astronomy, for instance, which caused so much concern to Catholic and Protestant theology, could be accepted by Judaism without any difficulty. The freedom of interpretation of religious beliefs which was granted in pre-talmudic and post-talmudic times borders almost on the allowance of atheism and the blasphemous. This free, inner development of religious thought could hardly have been better illustrated than by quoting that legend of Moses who hears Rabbi Akiba expound the Torah and does not even recognize it as—his Torah! Perhaps, as Baeck indicates, this degree of freedom of thought is partly due to the fact that Judaism, unlike Buddhism, Islam, and other religions, is not based on the teaching of one prophet but of a series of prophets and religious masters.

No less remarkable, however, than the lack of a rigid dogma is the lack of an essential distinction between laity and priesthood in Judaism. Even in Biblical times, the priesthood "was vested with no special proximity to God nor did it claim any. The priests never claimed to possess or to be able to administer gifts of grace; they never retailed salvation." According to Exodus 19:6, the whole Jewish community considered itself as destined to be "a kingdom of priests."

It is only such a religious movement as Quakerism, which grew up in the 17th century AD, in a new appreciation of the spirit of the Old Testament, that comes near to Judaism in its lack of dogma, the emphasis it lays on the moral deed, and its far-reaching rejection of a separate priesthood.

THERE are in Baeck's work also illuminating clarifications of old, central paradoxes of Jewish teaching. There is the seemingly irreconcilable contrast between Israel's claim to be the chosen people and its claim to represent a religion of universal validity. Baeck, however, shows that there is by no means a logical contradiction involved: "Just as family and love of fellow man do not exclude one another, so the universalism and particularism of the prophet's message are not contradictory." "Salvation is destined for the whole world," for the Children of Israel no more than for the Children of Noah; "a heathen who does right is worth as much as a High Priest in Israel." And, yet, to live under the ethical commandment of the "One God" was originally and specifically the task of Israel. This new way of life was Israel's creation and, as Baeck adds, in a courageous, free interpretation, "we are entitled to call this historically—quite apart from supernatural conceptions—a revelation."

The Jewish idea of a God of Wrath has, perhaps, given even more offence than the idea of Israel's "exclusiveness"; and on this point again, Baeck does not try to explain the difficulty away. He does not agree that the idea of God's boundless love should supplant the "lower" and earlier concept of the jealous and wrathful God. The divine wrath is, according to Baeck, the most adequate and powerful expression of the categorical character, of "the absoluteness and exclusiveness of the good." The failure to understand God's wrath along with his love "flows from a lack of ethical reaction to evil, from an absence of feeling about the sinfulness of every injustice on earth." Religion should "never dispense with the loathing of everything immoral." And even the affliction of the righteous is "justified" by Baeck in the words of Elihu in the Book of Job: "He delivereth the afflicted through his affliction."

BUT on this point I cannot quite suppress some doubting questions. Do these words of Elihu do sufficient justice to the depths at which the problem of suffering under God appears in the Book of Job? There seems to me too much of the spirit of Kant's categorical imperative in Baeck's work and not enough of the spirit of Job, the 90th Psalm, of Koheleth and — the Song of Songs.

Is it true that all morality is essentially "a contradiction and a protest"? Has Hermann Cohen or any other thinker succeeded in showing that to raise oneself by the moral act "above mere causality" is more than a popular and edifying phrase or a metaphysically questionable belief? According to Baeck, almost everything in Judaism is based on the "certainties of ethical conscience" in the free man, on the "clarity" of ethical commandments in every human breast; and he dismisses any doubt of the simplicity and certainty of the moral imperative as "ethical opportunism," as "a blurring

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of ethical standards," as a weak "moral compromise," or as some "of the evasions and ingenuities of a double-standard morality."

But all those millions of Nazis whose fury and hatred Baeck withstood—did they not also speak and act with a terrifying "certainty of ethical conscience" and according to an absolutely simple "uncompromising" standard of an ethics diametrically opposed to that of the simplicity of our prophets? Is the world, and even the Jewish world, not too often filled with those false prophets who in all sincerity preach a simple ethics which to us is the height of immorality? Does not Baeck himself say that even a sentence in one of the Ten Commandments was once rightly changed into its opposite by later, "clearer" moral insight?

I do not ask these questions out of ethical despair or in sympathy with moral indifference. On the contrary, I am passionately concerned to protect our moral standard from relativism and scepticism, from that nihilism which is only too often the unavoidable consequence of too great a trust in the simplicity and clarity of our ethical commandments. And if, as Baeck and his great predecessors teach us, the Name of God represents the source and incarnation of all moral good, then again, in my opinion, our generation can hardly have a more urgent task than this: to protect "the Name" more than ever before against its misuse and from the evergrowing ambiguity or even meaninglessness which it has acquired in the mouths of shallow believers.

On all these points I would side with Hillel's unpopular saying that "no ignorant person," no one without subtler insights, "can be pious"—a saying rejected by Baeck as not authoritative.

But my deep affectionate respect for Leo Baeck does not allow me to go on with such "polemics." I know only too well that what he said of other great Jewish documents can be applied also to his work: his *Essence of Judaism* contains only a small "fragment" of that for which he stands, of what he thought and what he lives for. The name of Baeck will be linked for all times with one of the severest trials which world Jewry and Jewish values had to undergo. And it seems to me that world history could not provide a more appropriate symbolic ending of this trial than the bodily and spiritual survival of Leo Baeck and the revival of a Jewish state.

The Sartre State of Mind

Nausea. By Jean-Paul Sartre. Translated by Lloyd Alexander. New Directions. 238 pages. $2.50.

Reviewed by Seymour Krim

This was Sartre's first "novel"—the first spurt of this Niagara Falls of letters. It was published in France in 1938. The date surprised me a little. My notion had been that Sartre's leap had come right out of the fighting, that

> *It was begotten by Despair*
> *Upon Impossibility.*

It was begotten by those things, but before the war. For this book—it is charity to call it a "novel"—finds everyday life rotten. The need to storm a heaven that isn't there came later, you can find it in Sartre's plays. In this first book there is none of that. There is just a rotten day-by-day existence.

What is the story about? A fellow of thirty named Antoine Roquentin is working on a biography of an old French scoundrel who lived a hundred or more years ago. Roquentin, an intellectual, is bored to the death with the meaninglessness of his (and all) life and soon quits writing his book. He has a girl-friend with whom he sleeps in a mechanical way and he quits that, too. Everything is *nada, nada, nada,* if you remember Hemingway's little story. At the end of the book Roquentin doesn't know what to do. To kill himself would be an act of faith—he can't do that! All he can do is lug his body through this stale joke of a life until he's taken. Which he does.

Now for the real story of Sartre's book. First, we must understand that Sartre is a new kind of pamphleteer. He is trying to sell us something. In order to sell us, he has to persuade us to believe in the reality he sets up in a book or a play. But what cuts him off from the real novelist or the real artist is that he isn't concerned with this reality as ultimate. He uses it as a disguise to club us with an Idea.

Once we grasp this, we can see Sartre more clearly, I think. After all, the man is phenomenal: he writes novels, plays, short stories, books of philosophy, psychology, literary criticism, etc. He's got his own political party.

In other words, he is interested in direct action and he'll use any medium to try and get

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

it. Whether it's philosophy, politics, or literature

All of this is impressive (to me, anyway), but at the same time Sartre forfeits serious consideration as a writer *qua* writer because of it. Like Koestler, he is a kind of highbrow microphone at heart; he can't newscast as readable a story, but his ideas are meatier.

NAUSEA is difficult to read because it is clumsily written, because there is an extreme lack of selection, and because Sartre never took the trouble to learn the techniques of fiction. The story of Roquentin is told through a diary which is found after his death. The diary, as James pointed out a long time ago, is a cheap and convenient device because it divests the novelist of his aesthetic responsibility to render experience dramatically and not rely on the "platitude of statement."

The Idea of *Nausea* boils down to this: Roquentin—the author's mouthpiece—experiences a profound revulsion when he comes into contact (and how can one help coming into contact?) with material objects. A tree, a glass of beer, a man's hand—they become nauseating to Roquentin. Why? The gross materiality of tangible objects apprehended by the senses, says Sartre, is inexplicable and ultimately absurd. Ordinarily, he says, we impose the categories of the mind upon material objects and thus thrust them from us. But when we strip language, hence thought, from the object we call a tree, it *exists* in a full, overwhelming, and terrifying way.

It is precisely this profusion of existence, without rhyme or reason, that represents futility to Roquentin. As he says: "Every existing thing is born without reason, prolongs itself out of weakness, and dies by chance."

In order to drive his point home, Sartre draws heavily on the method and sensibility of Louis-Ferdinand Céline, a fact that, I think, has not been dredged yet in the reviews. But what he does is to use Céline's loathing and "domesticate" it for an almost polemical purpose. In other words, poor Céline had no axe to grind; he bore his witness and that was that. Sartre, on the other hand, tailors Céline down to ideational size. One special way in which he does this is to use a ton of physiological detail: the pimples on a man's neck, the pimples within the pimples, etc.

With Céline, each pimple is a nail that skewers down the coffin of modern life. He must use images like pus, *merde*, and the rest in order to body his conviction of betrayal. As in Ezra Pound—whose *Cantos* are to poetry what Céline's testaments are to prose—naturalistic detail must be considered by the reader as weapons with which these two men can shoot out their hatred and indignation, which is ultimately a judgment and wired up to God.

Sartre, however, is something else again. When he tailors down Céline's detail to fit his *immediate* and *utilitarian* purpose of writing a kind of tract he tailors down Céline's outrage. He "domesticates" it, as I said before. Thus his use of natural objects as demonstrating the meaninglessness of this existence becomes a sort of "illustration," the way a teacher might talk to a class. It isn't the thing itself.

Flaubert in one of his letters wrote: "If a thing is true, it is good." He wrote this about a hundred years ago when he introduced the period of naturalism which is now ending. For the modern naturalist, the phrase would now read: "If a thing is true, it is bad."

In other words, we are now coming to realize that in imaginative literature we adjust the visible and empirical "facts" to speak for our attitudes which are—what other word is there?—moral. So in this little book of Sartre's the world of natural objects, inexplicable and nauseating, is a screen upon which is flashed a state of mind.

The Quest for the American

IN THE AMERICAN GRAIN. By WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS. New Directions. 235 pp. $1.50.

THE MOVEMENT TO AMERICANIZE THE IMMIGRANT. By EDWARD GEORGE HARTMANN. Columbia University Press. 333 pp. $4.00.

Reviewed by DANIEL J. BOORSTIN

WHILE Dr. Williams' little book, first published in 1925 and now reprinted with a helpful introduction by Horace Gregory, purports to recount America's "attempt at redefinition, to find equivalent terms in a new setting for old modes," it is almost ostentatiously devoid of ideology. Cortez, Ponce De Leon, De Soto, Cotton Mather, and Aaron Burr are presented almost as if they were figures in a non-objective painting, drawn for their unique shape and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

color and nothing more. Dr. Williams seeks to express them either in passages from their writings or in his own nervous prose. His treatment is free and episodic, beginning with the Vikings and ending with Abraham Lincoln.

Unlike Parrington, who was his contemporary, Dr. Williams does not hold out the American tradition as a search for any ideal of social justice. His are the heroes of conquest rather than of construction—conquistadors, Elizabethan buccaneers, and John Paul Joneses, rather than Puritans and Federalists and pioneer women. It is the intensity of passion felt by a man rather than the purity or magnitude of his vision that merits him a place in this calendar. Thomas Morton dancing round his maypole and frolicking with the Indian girls at Merrymount, and Aaron Burr dreaming of a bizarre empire and exuding a strange fascination over women, hold the center of the stage, while Hamilton, Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln stand in the wings. One need be neither chauvinistic nor humorless to discern the myopia and transience of Dr. Williams' vision.

PERHAPS the most suggestive leitmotif of the volume is its haunted preoccupation with the Puritans. Without seeing them clearly, Dr. Williams does recognize them as the strongest moral and intellectual force in earlier American history. While the best he can call them is "seed of England's lusty blossoming," more than once he complains that they were "hard and little."

Still his characterization of the Puritans is less significant than his choice of them as the perfect antithesis to his version of "Americanism" in the 1920's. "All that will be new in America will be anti-Puritan." Nor does his antipathy spring mainly from those superficial disparities of sexual morals and sensuality which (though largely fictitious) have been often remarked. "You speak of Mather's books—? Yes, they were the flower of that religion, that unreasonable thing, on which they prided themselves for its *purity*. That is, its rigid clarity, its *inhuman* clarity, its steel-like thrust from the heart of each isolate man straight into the tabernacle of Jehovah without embellishment or softening." What Dr. Williams cannot bear in the Puritans is actually not their bigotry, their tribalism, or even their religiosity, but rather their clarity! What he most resents (with perhaps as much envy as resentment) is that these very men who lacked the emotional abandon to become conquering heroes in his pattern, possessed in its place a sharpness of definition and conviction that his age most missed.

Dr. Williams even seems to sense that the Puritans, with all their faults, may have come closer to understanding the "steel-like thrust from the heart of each man" which morbidly preoccupied his own age, but which it lacked the vocabulary to grasp. Perhaps the eloquence and impact of the essays comes from their being so unvarnished a portrait of the gropings of his own era. Dr. Williams plainly lives among the passionate instincts of men (early and late) on this continent. And although he purports to seek what is characteristically American—"in the American grain"—he produces only the forked radish, that animal nakedness which is most the same about men all over the world and in all ages.

MR. HARTMANN'S volume describes from another point of view the popular search for an American stereotype which was going on during the era of Dr. Williams' writing. In his monograph, which unfortunately both in scope and execution bears the mark of contemporary graduate education, he tells the story of the movement to "Americanize" the immigrant from about 1910 to 1920. This is a competent and well-documented if unimaginative and sometimes vapid account of the energetic efforts of organizations and individuals to assimilate recent immigrants. Throughout much of the period the movement was dominated by groups which sought to stigmatize all radical social movements as "foreign." Their objective was less the transmission of a tradition than the "assimilation to American behavior patterns." The murkiness of their purpose neither dampened their enthusiasm nor restrained the energies of those bent on "doing something" about the immigrant. Their busy-work was encouraged because by identifying alienism with the inability to speak or write English, Americanizing groups managed to secure that semblance of clarity which Fourth of July celebrations and "Americanization Day" activities hardly provided. If the immigrant would only learn to talk and write like an American, he would somehow magically know whatever it was which any one ought to say or feel as an American.

The search of chambers of commerce, associations of manufacturers, and labor unions for a practical definition of Americanism, which Mr. Hartmann conscientiously describes, would

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

at first seem remote from the Greenwich Village climate of Dr. Williams' work. But perhaps Dr. Williams actually has laid bare, as only a poet could, that misconception of man's quest which accounts for much of the frustration which his age experienced in its effort to discover a tradition. He reveals with discomfiting clarity how inconsistent is a rootless passionate individualism with an ability to ask fruitful questions of one's ancestors, and hence why all brands of recent "Americanizers" have been ill-qualified to learn from man's past. Perhaps also the chasm in modern American life which has separated the poet and the intellectual from the so-called men of action—a chasm not similarly found in England or France—helps explain the difficulty which we still encounter in our attempt to discover ourselves and to define an authentic American tradition.

Jewish Scholarship and Scholars

ESSAYS IN JEWISH BIOGRAPHY. By ALEXANDER MARX. Philadelphia, Jewish Publication Society of America. 298 pp. $3.00.

Reviewed by MILTON HIMMELFARB

THE first four Jewish scholars whose lives and works are described in this collection of popular essays flourished in the Middle Ages; the remaining eight were born in the 19th century, and one, Max L. Margolis, died only about fifteen years ago. At least six of these eight, all of whom Professor Marx knew, were master builders of the towering structure of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums,* of which the author himself could truly say, *pars magna fui.*

The medieval figures are Saadia Gaon; Rabbenu Gershom, Light of the Exile; Rashi; and Maimonides. With the possible exception of Rabbenu Gershom, they exercised a decisive influence on the further development of Jewish thought: the learning of the yeshiva, the researches of modern scholars, and the thinking of contemporary Jewish *Existenz* theologians. Of the eight moderns, Joseph Jacobs occupied a peripheral place in Jewish scholarship, and Mayer Sulzberger, a judge and community leader in the United States at the turn of the century, is included in this roster mostly *honoris causa.* The others—Moritz Steinschneider, David Hoffman, Solomon Schechter, Henry Malter, Max L. Margolis, and Israel Friedlaender—were unusually learned and creative men.

It has been remarked that a significant difference between genius in mathematics and the physical sciences and genius in the social and historical sciences is the age at which the great practitioners reach the height of their powers. Einstein has said that typically the mathematician and theoretical physicist must be revealed as a genius before he is thirty, or not at all. The social scientist matures late; the greatest of the subjects of these essays, Moritz Steinschneider, was still adding to his massive and irreplaceable work in Jewish bibliography when he died, in his ninety-first year. (The mathematician Evariste Galois was killed in a duel before he was twenty-one.) Yet the men of these sketches, if they matured to creativity late, also showed extraordinary intellectual capacity from their earliest childhood. We are deeply impressed when we learn that John Stuart Mill was reading Greek at a time when the rest of us are struggling with the notion that c-a-t spells cat; but at the same age most of these future Jewish scholars were reading the Pentateuch with Rashi's commentary, in Hebrew. (Rashi is printed in a separate script, without vowel points.)

PROBABLY the main reason for the relatively late-maturing creativity of Jewish scholars, in bulk and in excellence, is the difficulty of mastering the tools needed for their work. A dozen or so languages, ancient and modern, Semitic and Indo-European; the whole extent and depth of the Talmudic and rabbinic literatures; the detailed history of remote countries and obscure periods; the matter and history of philosophy and theology, and a few ancillary skills like paleography—a mastery of all these, and more, had first to be won before a man like Steinschneider could begin to feel confident of his ability to carry out the program of work he had set for himself. It is easier to be an American historian.

One curious and characteristic feature of their work was that they tended to avoid Biblical research. (Schechter established the Hebrew text of Ecclesiasticus, but that is a very late book; only Margolis's pioneer work in the Septuagint text of Joshua is a real exception.) The Higher Criticism had been carried on chiefly under Protestant auspices. Jewish scholars, and especially the rabbinical institutions with which many of them were associated, pre-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ferred to avoid a discipline in which the accepted science was an affront to the traditional tenet of Torah from Sinai. Even the Jewish scholarship of these days, though somewhat more Biblical than it used to be, is still embarrassed by the Pentateuch and tends to concentrate on the Prophets and the later books.

Dr. Marx is the professor of Jewish history in the Jewish Theological Seminary, the head of the Seminary's famous library, and the outstanding Jewish bibliographer of our age. He has the bibliographer's weakness for the publication history of the works of great men, to the relative neglect of their ideas and the place of those ideas in intellectual and social history. In a sense, therefore, an essay like the one on Saadia Gaon is like *Hamlet* without Hamlet; frequent mention is made of the Karaites, but the reasons why Karaism was so formidable a danger to traditional Judaism as to engage much of the energy of Saadia in combatting it are not set forth sufficiently.

More than twenty-five years separate the original dates of publication of some of the essays in this book. This fact explains minor discrepancies, like Professor Marx's statement in his chapter on Maimonides that there is no proof Maimonides was ever *nagid* (official head) of the Egyptian Jewish community, and an apparent contradiction in the Friedlaender chapter.

Books on Race Relations

THE SOCIAL POLITICS OF FEPC. By LOUIS COLERIDGE KESSELMAN. The University of North Carolina Press. 253 pp. $3.50.

ALL MANNER OF MEN. By MALCOLM ROSS. Reynal and Hitchcock. 314 pp. $3.50.

AMERICA DIVIDED. By ARNOLD and CAROLINE ROSE. Alfred A. Knopf. 342 pp. $3.00.

Reviewed by SAMUEL H. FLOWERMAN

THREE more books have been added to the cascade of volumes in the field of human relations. *All Manner of Men* and *The Social Politics of FEPC* deal with legislative attempts to prevent discrimination in employment; *America Divided* is an over-all view of religious, ethnic, and nationality cleavages in the United States today.

Louis Coleridge Kesselman is a young political scientist (now on the faculty of the University of Louisville) whose curiosity about how pressure groups operate in a democracy led him to make a case study of the National Council for a Permanent FEPC. A one-man research team, limited in time and resources, Kesselman had to rely largely on the files of the National Council and a few interviews with key figures—principally Anna Arnold Hedgeman, the first executive secretary of the Council. Kesselman traces the recent history of the fair employment practices movement, beginning with Roosevelt's Executive Orders 8802 and 9356, forced by A. Philip Randolph's threat of a march on Washington, and continuing with the National Council's heartbreaking struggle to get financial backing and other support. Leaders and supporters bickered and clashed; Kesselman portrays Randolph as a prima donna with too many other irons in the fire, too stubborn to compromise, and too rigid to coordinate or be coordinated. The Council was amateurish in its lobbying and unable to get behind its campaign such key groups as the NAACP, the Urban League, the American Federation of Labor, the CIO, and the major Jewish organizations (Catholic and Protestant church groups were apparently more helpful).

One wonders whether, at the time, better organization, greater financial and moral support, and better leadership could have produced a Federal law; and whether the National Council's efforts did not later bear fruit in President Truman's Committee on Civil Rights and the Democratic party's civil-rights plank. Kesselman does not consider these questions.

Kesselman is open to attack at a number of points: when he charges inadequate support by groups that should have been concerned, when he criticises Randolph and praises Anna Hedgeman, and especially when he argues that Randolph and the Council should have reached a compromise with the Communists for strategic reasons. But criticisms unduly emphasized would blur Kesselman's real contribution. His book suggests the value of other case studies: of, for example, the campaign to secure DP legislation, which resulted in a fiasco; or of the campaigns for state FEPC's, where findings could guide those in many states who are pressing for such legislation.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ALL MANNER OF MEN is the story of the wartime FEPC, told by the man who headed it. It is written with nostalgia and with essential kindness by a man who has made a great psychological investment in fair employment. Our hearts warm to him as the best kind of Yankee liberal. But he is no deep political analyst, no penetrating seeker of cause and effect; those who tire of messages of brotherly love will impatiently turn, even if with a huzzah or two, from a book in which we read: "The will to be bold in this matter . . . that is what we all must find. When the North and South have exercised it together, then we will be again a truly united nation, diverse in peoples, powerful in single purpose."

IN *America Divided*, Caroline and Arnold Rose have tried to do too much, and have produced a hasty conglomeration of good and bad. In 342 pages they try to deal with American minorities, past and present; the position of minorities under American law, and their position in political, economic, and social life; group identification and morale; organization and disorganization of minority communities; physical and psychological differences among races and nationalities; the psychology of prejudice; and trends in intergroup relations. Any one of these topics alone merits a full-scale volume.

It is never quite clear for whom the book has been written. The preface speaks of its use by students, and many parts of the book are written at about a high-school level; but simple language alternates with rather sophisticated terminology.

The most serious weakness of the book is that its backbone is the material on the Negro, which Arnold Rose has presented far more effectively in previous works; and the rest has to be filled in with scanty, inadequately documented, impressionistic material on Mexicans, Indians, Jews, Catholics, etc. The important line between subjective value-judgments and research evidence is not always carefully drawn. The authors have been courageous and forthright in stating their position on many issues, but courage is no substitute for scientific caution.

One begins to feel uncomfortable before the plethora of books on interracial, interreligious, and intercultural problems. Apparently one no longer has to "sell" publishers on books about prejudice. But the time has certainly now come for far greater care in publication. We would all be grateful for less material, but more carefully gathered, assessed, and analyzed.

BOOK REVIEWERS IN THIS ISSUE

WALLACE MARKFIELD has published stories in *Partisan Review*.

WILL HERBERG's last article for COMMENTARY was "Has Judaism Still Power to Speak?," in the May issue. He is now working on a book on Jewish theology.

DAVID BAUMGARDT is consultant in philosophy to the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.

SEYMOUR KRIM has reviewed books for the *New York Times Book Review*.

DANIEL J. BOORSTIN is an American historian and legal scholar. He is assistant professor of social and legal history on the Committee on Social Thought of the University of Chicago, and the author of *The Mysterious Science of the Law* and *The Lost World of Thomas Jefferson*.

MILTON HIMMELFARB is the author of the essay "The Vindictive and the Merciful" in the July COMMENTARY. He has studied at the Sorbonne and the Seminary College of Jewish Studies, and is now on the staff of the American Jewish Committee.

SAMUEL H. FLOWERMAN is head of the Department of Scientific Research and Program Evaluation of the American Jewish Committee.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ADOLPH LEWISOHN & SONS, INC.

61 Broadway

New York 6, N. Y.

METALS

FINE FUNERAL SERVICE For over 50 Years

RIVERSIDE *Memorial Chapel, Inc.*

Funeral Directors

Charles Rosenthal
Edward Rosenthal
Morton Rosenthal
Carl Grossberg
Maxwell W. Passerman
Leo J. Filer

NEW YORK • BROOKLYN • LONG ISLAND
BRONX • WESTCHESTER • MIAMI • MIAMI BEACH

COMMENTARY

is printed by

THE COMET PRESS, INC.

200 Varick Street, New York 14, N. Y.
WAtkins 4-6700

65

PRINTERS OF FINE BOOKLETS, BOOKS, AND PUBLICATIONS

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED